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CORNER BOY

- HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
LITERARY FELLOWSHIP
• AWARDS
- To E. P. O'Donnell for *Green Margins*
 To Jenny Ballou for *Spanish Prelude*
 To Robert Penn Warren for *Night Rider*
 To Clelie Benton Huggins for *Point Noir*
 To Dorothy Baker for *Young Man with a Horn*
 To David Cornel DeJong for *Old Haven*
 To Maurine Whipple for *The Giant Joshua*
 To Mary King O'Donnell for *Quincie Bolliver*
 To Helen Todd for *A Man Named Grant*
 To A. Fleming MacLeish for *Cone of Silence*
 To Donald MacRae for *Dwight Craig*
 To Joseph Wechsberg for *Looking for a Bluebird*
 To Ann Petry for *The Street*
 To Beatrice Griffith for *American Me*
 To Elizabeth Bishop for *North & South*
 To Helen Mears for *Mirror for Americans, Japan*
 To Arthur Mizener for *The Far Side of Paradise*
 To Anthony West for *The Vintage*
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 To Rebecca C. Patterson for *The Riddle of
Emily Dickinson*
 To Madison A. Cooper, Jr., for *Sironia, Texas*
 To Charles Bracelen Flood for *Love Is a Bridge*
 To Siegel Fleisher for *The Lion and
the Honeycomb*
 To Harold Livingstone for *The Coasts
of the Earth*
 To Milton Lott for *The Last Hunt*
 To Edward Hoagland for *Cat Man*
 To Eugene Burdick for *The Ninth Wave*
 To Herbert Simmons for *Corner Boy*

A NOVEL

BY

HERBERT

SIMMONS

CORNER BOY

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON

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To Rubye

who caused a boy's dreams to crumble
and a writer's vision to grow . . .

And my thanks

to Professor Jarvis Thurston
whose guidance made it possible
for me to write this book

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1 SPOTS ON THE WALL

LOUNGING under the lampposts on the corners of the city, crowded together in the dark back alleys and gambling dens, you'll find them. Worn-out men with young faces, scattered through the cities you'll find them, young men as old as the oldest man in the world.

Take eighteen-year-old Jake Adams. Tall, slim and solid in silhouette as the lamppost he leaned against. On his face was a look that could only be described as casual tenseness. This look came often to his face and was one of the things that made him attractive to women. He held a cigarette loosely between his lips and the smoke spiraled lazily upward to linger in the hazy light from the lamp bulb. Out in the street hurrying cars blared angry horns at foolish pedestrians.

"Hey, Jake, what you trying to do, get a suntan?" a guy called from across the street and dashed bravely through the traffic over to where Jake was. It was Scar, Jake's best friend,

a tall lithe nineteen-year-old, who wore his unruly hair in a close-clipped, crew-cut fashion and got his name from the long razor-inflicted welt that crawled diagonally from his right temple through the cleft in his chin.

"Hey Scar, what's up?"

"World's tired, man, trying to keep the monkey off my back."

"Dammit, Scar, I told you about riding the mainline."

Scar shrugged. "Let's go stick a few across the green," he said. They walked west down Welch Street, past Judie's and the Circle Theater, past Maxwell's candy house, past the long row of listing, dingy tenements and the alley between the tenements and Booker's Billiard Parlor at the end of the block.

Only the first two of the seven squatty pool tables were occupied. It was 10 P.M. and the place should have been crowded at that hour. The pool equipment was the only thing new in the place, the building was like the neighborhood — tired, old, and washed with dirt.

"What's the game?"

"Make it bank, four and four," Scar said.

"Break out."

Scar bent over the table in the slightly pigeon-toed stance good pool shooters assume to apply power to the stroke when breaking the balls. Right arm and leg went back, and then forward together. The seven, five, and deuce fell. "Need one," Scar said. Scar made the straight and two of his banks before missing. Scar was too good for Jake, and Jake knew it, except when . . . The hell with it, Jake thought.

"Say kid, who's the broad I saw you with yesterday?" Booker said, coming over to the table. Booker was the portly, middle-aged owner of the pool hall, who had been racking pool balls for over twenty years and was still a kid at heart.

"Who you talking 'bout, Maxine?" Jake took his eye off the ball momentarily and glanced sidewise at Booker.

Booker brushed vainly in an effort to wipe some of the chalk dust from his gray-and-white houndstooth vest. "Aw, I know Maxine," he said impatiently. "This broad was short, but stacked up real tough, with black, pretty hair and a crazy smile. She had some cute eyes too, something like a Jap girl's only they didn't slant as much."

"Where were you to notice all this?" Scar cut in.

"'Cross the street from the school, sure is fine."

"Sure is," Scar agreed.

"Who is she?" Booker said. "Got a switch to give you an itch for."

"Eleven ball in the side," Jake said, trying to keep from sounding annoyed. The ball hit the corner of the pocket and spun off. "Need one," Jake said disgustedly.

"Who is she?" Booker persisted.

"Girl named Armenta," Jake said casually, hoping Booker would drop the subject.

"She's tough," Booker said.

"Ain't she," Scar said. "Got lots of sense too."

"Is she!" Booker said, making it sound like a statement.

"Your shot," Jake told Scar.

Scar called a cross-corner shot and made it. "Eight ball three rails in the corner."

"What's Maxine going to do?" Booker wanted to know.

"What's it to ya?" Jake said quietly.

"Need one," Scar said, watching the eight ball just miss the corner.

"Don't be getting mad, what's he getting hot about?" Booker said to Scar.

"Leave him alone," Scar said.

"Can you beat that, I've been bull-skating for years with

this guy about his ole ladies and now he's getting hot. What's so diff'nt about this broad, she got a gold-plated — ”

“Shut up,” Jake said quietly.

“Leave him alone,” Scar said.

“Well of all the — ” Booker threw up his hands and walked away.

“’Nother game?” Scar said after sinking the eight ball.

The door of the poolroom opened with a flourish and Spider walked in. “Say, man, they got a crowd over at Zodie’s, let’s drift.” Spider had on a new suit, a gray shark-skin single-breasted, with the New Look front and seamless back. The shoulders were almost bare of padding and the suit looked neat on his tall, rawboned frame.

“You ought to wear light-colored clothes all the time,” Scar said. “They look good on you.”

“Come on, man, let’s dig the happenings at Zodie’s,” Spider said.

“What kind of crowd, old or new?” Jake wanted to know.

“New, think I’d play to an old crowd?”

“Think they’ll catch on?” Jake said looking at Scar.

“Naw, man,” Spider said. “Come on, let’s drift.”

Jake shrugged. “What the hell, let’s try it.”

They hung up the sticks and paid for the game. “If Monk comes in tell him I’m at Zodie’s.”

“O.K., Jake,” Booker said. “You guys take it easy.”

2

ZODIE’S was across the street down at the other end of the block. Called the Zodiac, it combined a bowling alley with a

tavern and did a thriving business. They went through the tavern into a small room in the back. The closed door shut out the sound of intoxicated voices and the whine of an alto sax, backed by a piano, drum, and bass fiddle.

Inside the back room were a crowd of men and a few women. Caldonia was there too. Caldonia, who wore women's clothes and a poodle hair cut, and took douches because all girls took douches.

Smoke hung in the room like fog in a swamp. Small round dots of fire bit the atmosphere; the harsh burning ring of the cigarette, the feeble glow of the cigar, the ash-splattered flame of the pipe, gave off a poignant scent of tobacco. In the corners the cold, hard, bright red glare. It gave the foggy room a sweet intoxication. People crowded around the table where the man in the black pin-striped suit was throwing the dice.

"Dig the square," Spider said.

"Aunt Jeremiah's country cousin fattened for the kill."

The square was winning. The square caught nine for a point and made it. The square caught five for a point and made that too. The money started piling up. A baldheaded, wrinkle-faced old man said something unheard and walked away from the table. Nobody wanted to fade the square, but the man to the right was supposed to, if he wanted to stay in the game. That was the house rule. The money was piling up, the square was hot.

The sweaty little man in overalls didn't want to fade the square. His high voice rose excitedly from thin lips. His flat nose quivered. Grease trailed onto his narrow tan face in smeary blotches from the straight, sticky patches of his conked hair. The cold, impersonal marble-brown eyes of the houseman fixed themselves indifferently upon the sweaty little man. The heavy lips on his stony face moved slowly.

"Got to fade to stay, less somebody else wants to join the game."

"I'll try him," Spider said moving between the little man and the square.

"Move over," Scar said, and squeezed between the little man and Spider.

The little man flushed with anger, but saw the welt on Scar's face and said nothing. When Jake moved in between him and Scar he hardly noticed.

At a dollar a lick the square hit Spider four times before he missed his point.

Across the street from the Zodiac, next to the pawnshop, the movie came to an end promptly at 11 P.M. and the people trickled out of the Circle Theater. Some jumped into the long line of waiting cabs, others walked to the corner and waited for a bus. Many went across the street into the Zodiac or farther down the street into Bill's B.B.Q. Inn or Club Paradise. Some walked all the way down to the corner and went into a dingy, cramped restaurant christened Molly's, but called the Greasy Spoon by the customers. Welch Street came to life. Blocks of night clubs and taverns neon-lighted a message of pleasure and spoke their charms with blaring music and the shuffle of stimulated voices. Women of the night went to their stations at the bar stools. Caldonia's crowd offered five, ten, fifteen. Welch Street was a nauseated volcano erupting people.

Spider, his dark face void of expression, clicked the dice together in his huge hand. The dice rolled from his hand and came up seven.

"That black boy sure got a way with them dice."

The dice rolled again and Scar, who was fading Spider, let them roll without stopping them, which he could do if he wanted to. The dice came up seven.

"Pay me," Jake said.

The little man with the conk tossed Jake a dollar. The grain-colored woman tossed Jake a dollar. The fat man, whose nose sang when he breathed, reached into his cream-colored pants and tossed Jake a half dollar. The tall muscular guy, at Jake's elbow, knitted his brow and tossed him a half. Somewhere, from out in the crowd, quarters flowed. Everybody wanted to get in on a sure thing. Jake was laying two-to-one odds that Spider would hit. The fat man reached into his pocket and snatched a large green-and-white handkerchief. He put the cloth to his nose and sniffed. He made a pretense of wiping the beefy face under his curly black hair. Spider collected a dollar, on a private bet, from the guy in the pin-striped suit. Spider hit eight straight licks at two dollars a wop. The money was reluctantly pulled from Scar's pocket. Then Spider caught a point and missed. The dice finally arrived at the sweaty little man. He threw craps and cursed. He threw seven and gave a desperate laugh. He threw five and blew on the dice. He cajoled the dice. "Five dice, five!" The dice turned up three. "Five, come on, dice, five!" The dice bounced crazily, spun as if they were being pulled down a whirlpool and turned up six and one. The little man laughed derisively. The dice came to Jake. The little man would not fade Jake for more than a half dollar. Jake caught eight for a point and made it. The stone-faced houseman took the fifty-cent piece and threw Jake four dimes. The little man placed another fifty-cent piece gingerly on the table and held his breath. Jake threw the dice and the little man caught them. Jake let the dice go again and the little man stopped them. Jake smiled. The little man ran his fingers over his greasy hair. Jake threw the dice and the little man let them roll and they turned up seven. Jake smiled. The little man ran his fingers over his greasy head,

and left the table. "Fifty dollars, sweet Jesus, fifty boons you'll never see again, lord have mercy! A whole week's pay, God damn!"

The dice passed to Scar. The dice rolled out clinging like lovers. Spider bet that Scar would hit; Scar bet on himself. They gave odds to get somebody to bet against Scar. People bet against Scar and lost money. "That wipes me out," Jake said and left the game.

Spider got the dice again. After Spider hit him for five straight licks, Scar decided he had had enough also. Now Spider started catching points instead of seven on the first roll. Spider was hot, he even made four the hard way. He made five points before missing. Leaving the game, Spider lost his balance and bumped into the houseman. In the houseman's pocket were three ten's that hadn't been there before. "Get hot, dice, get hot. Don't have to share your luck no more," the pin-striped square said

3

ON THE LOT, next to the Greasy Spoon, they divided the money. "Wow," Spider said. "Just about seventy-five skins apiece."

"When do you think they'll get wise?" Scar said.

"They'll never get wise," Spider said. It was his standard reply. Spider kissed the small dice in his hand that matched the set in the Zodiac.

Jake whistled for a cab cutting across Welch on Thirteenth Street.

"Where to, Jack?" The voice was a part of the street.

Where to . . . step into my cab and I will show you my wares. I will whisper of bars that open after legits close down, of cool, dark corners where intimacies and strangers are one, of close revolving atmospheres where the hard red glare glows, or the plunger, and love for sale. I can lead you to a cross stream, whose current is the swift pace of a big city on the move, in the dark, while the tissue-paper morals of society are soggy with sleep, and if you tire of the pace, or flounder in the stream, I can always take you home . . .

"Ninth and Welch," Spider said.

"Fifteen-o-six South Thirteenth," Scar said.

"Thirteen-thirteen Wisconsin, what the hell, I ain't ready to go home yet."

Thirteen-thirteen Wisconsin, of course. Where else would Jake be going? All the same Scar wished he hadn't been around to hear Jake say where he was heading. Well, she was his ole lady, wasn't she?

"Say, you guys still moving around in circles?" Spider said. "I guess when Jake moves out on Maxine for Armenta, you move in, then when you move out for Armenta, Jake moves in on your ole lady, ain't that the way it goes?"

Jake and Scar looked at Spider. "Yeh, I guess," Jake said listlessly. He didn't mean it though. It made him sick to think of Scar moving in on Armenta. He tried to shake off the feeling. He and Scar had often exchanged girls, so to speak. But not Armenta. A guy had to draw the line somewhere.

Spider talked on and on about the things they used to do. Spider was too engrossed in talking and Jake was too involved with his own thoughts to notice Scar's silence.

"This is me," Spider said. "Later on."

"Later," they said. The cab pulled away as Spider ran across the street and disappeared into a gangway between

the corner tavern and the delicatessen on the southeast side of Welch Street.

Forget her, Scar was thinking. You don't want her, not now. Not much you don't. She alone you wanted for yourself, just for yourself. It's too late now. Yes, it's too late, because you can't get her on that basis. Well, neither can he get Armenta on that basis. Didn't you and Armenta years ago? But how were you to know Jake was going to become crazy about Armenta? Jake didn't know about you and Armenta. You wonder if he would feel the same about her if he did. Or would it be different, like the way you feel about Maxine is different? Different, and yet all the same. Well, Jake didn't know how you felt about Maxine either. Forget it, Jake's your friend, your best friend. No woman is worth breaking up that.

"Later on, Scar," Jake said.

"Later."

Scar watched the cab head south toward Wisconsin Avenue. The hell with it he told himself. He couldn't go directly to sleep. There was the spoon, the flame, the plunge. He floated a long time, riding his habit hard . . . *Armenta is the best thing could have happened to Jake, his mind said. Who is Armenta? his other self wanted to know. Lucky, lucky guy. Not as lucky as you. You're a king, you have a palace in the clouds, you're up so high, the height's so long you need a parachute to go downstairs. I wish I was in college. What you want to go to college for, man, that's for squares. They said I was a great halfback. You great now, man, don't you feel great, up in the clouds? What could be greater than that? Maxine. Jake's girl. I really used to like Maxine. Armenta is Jake's girl. I still go for Maxine. That's Jake's girl, jake's, Jake's, JAKE'S! It was. She still is . . . Yeah, she still is. College, football, beating your legs against*

the line, running, running to Max . . . one of these days going to college. Going to go, go, go, be great, somebody. Man, I done tole you, you great now, you in the clouds, you getting your kicks way up high, don't nobody live up here but you. Lonely — taking the long lonely road. Man, I done tole you, you great, you in the clouds, man, ain't I done tole you —

4

THE STEPS complained as Jake galloped up to the second floor. He was careful not to touch the wall, and stain his jacket. There was no light coming from her room. He rapped lightly on the door.

"Is that you, Jake?"

"Nobody else but."

"Just a minute."

"Here Rover," a young female voice drifted up from somewhere in the streets. Screaming tires, trying to hold, mingled with the night sounds. A rustle of garments. Light flooding under the door. Minutes dragged —

"I thought you weren't coming," Maxine said, opening the door. Her coarse black hair was in a net. Even now, in her black-and-gold Chinese style bathrobe, a faint blush spanked her light-brown skin. Her wide, attractive mouth broke into a grin. "I cursed you out," she said, wrinkling her small broad nose at him.

"How could you?" Jake said. "You don't even know the words."

His touch was as familiar as if they had been living to-

gether all their lives. She broke away from him shyly. She sat down on the bed with her head turned toward the wall. She did not look his way when he casually started taking off his clothes.

5

EVELYN KEYES turned off the radio she had been listening to for the past three hours. She was peeved with herself because she had not put her hair up for the night. Maybe she should let it slide just for the night. No, Spider might come over tomorrow. She had to keep her hair looking nice; it was her one good point. She knew she was for the main part a plain girl, but Spider said she had nice hair. He told her that way back in grade school. She had to try to keep it looking nice. Her hair was thick and black and wild. It took her hours to pin it up, and there was not a home permanent kit on the market that could keep it in curls, nor was there a beauty parlor that could turn the trick, for that matter. No, her hair wouldn't curl, but if she took enough pains with it, it would be in thick fluffy waves in the morning. She started doing her hair. A slow, methodical process.

Spider was so wild. He didn't have a regular job, just as an extra waiter now and then, but he always had money, and he always wanted to take her some place where he could throw it away. Not that she didn't like to go out, it was just that she couldn't ever see them getting any place at the rate they were going. He said he wanted to marry her. She wondered what kind of life that would be. Not that she didn't want to marry him, but she knew he gambled. She won-

dered if she was doomed to feel insecure all of her life.

She smiled, remembering the minor victory she had won. She had talked him into giving her five dollars a week for her to put away and save. She only made \$28 a week as a stock girl in one of the big stores downtown, but managed to put \$10 of that away every week. They might be able to get somewhere after all. They might be able to have a house someday and some children. Not a big house, nothing extravagant. Just something where they could raise some kids and be happy, and not have to worry about the plaster falling down on them. It wouldn't be like this place she lived in on Elm Street. No, it could never be like the lean-to wrecks on Elm Street, not their house. She sighed. She was getting sleepy. She should have been in bed hours ago. She had to get up at six-thirty in order to arrive at work by eight. She dipped on the wave solution a little faster, hurried just a little bit more with her curls. It was still a long, slow process.

6

THE BIG CLOCK down over the railroad station struck four. A siren screamed. Somewhere in the distance dogs yelped at intruders in the alleyways.

"It's four o'clock," Maxine said. "I've got to get up to go to work at seven."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't feel right."

"Uh-huh."

"Jake, I'm not kidding."

"Good, I hope you're not having no kids."

"How long does this go on?"

Jake got up without answering and began to dress rapidly.

"Jake, I'm talking to you."

"I hear you."

"Well, why don't you say something then?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I hate you."

"Do you?" Jake said raising an eyebrow.

"You're impossible to reach. You won't let anyone talk to you."

"You're talking to me."

"I don't mean that way, I mean really talk to you, you know what I mean."

"Uh-huh."

"I thought I knew how to reach all of you. Maybe I'm wrong, maybe there isn't any more to you after all."

"Why don't you go to sleep, Maxine?"

"Before you go, Jake, I want to know something."

"Sure."

"How long does this go on?"

"You mean —"

"I mean you seem content to go on like this forever. We're different. I want to do things."

"Like what, get married?"

"Someday, what girl doesn't? But I wasn't speaking exactly about that."

"You mean you want to become a famous dancer, and tag a husband along behind you."

"You have an awful way of putting things."

"That's it though."

"Well, you could be a doctor or something."

"And we'll live happily ever after," Jake said mockingly.

"Look, baby, let's get it straight. I wish you all the luck in the world on that dancer deal and I'll help you all I can, but you're right when you say I'm satisfied. Why shouldn't I be? I'm beginning to make that long bread in a short time and the sky's the limit."

"How?" She shot the accusation at him almost bitterly.

"That's incidental."

"Go away, leave me alone," she said.

"You're too sensitive, Slim, the world's made of sticks and mud."

"That doesn't mean you have to tear it up, smoking pod and —"

"Doing what?" Jake said, surprised and unnerved.

"I know you smoke pod," she said simply. Too simply for Maxine.

"Who told you?" Jake said defensively.

"No one had to tell me, I saw you with my own eyes. Last week when we came back from the dance you were loaded. You stayed so long in the bathroom I thought you had passed out, so I looked in to see. You were on the weed. I knew 'cause the cigarette was so skinny and had a funny smell."

"Well, don't worry about it."

"I won't," she answered just as brusquely. "I'm warning you though, you start fooling with Boy and Girl and I'm through with you. I don't want no junkies hanging around me."

"Don't worry," Jake said. "You think I'm stupid?" Maxine did not answer. "You got any friends on junk?"

"What do you think I am?"

So Maxine didn't know about Scar. He wondered what she would think if she knew. Scar had been a great high school athlete. All the girls had been crazy about Scar. "How do you know so much about junk then?"

"Don't worry about it, I know," Maxine said.

The change taking place in Maxine struck Jake with the force of a blow. She had been smart in books, but dumb when it came to worldly things. He watched the smoke curl into her nose as she french-inhaled. To think he'd gone with this babe a whole month before she came across, although she had not been a virgin, and here she was three short months later talking like she had been on the corners all her life. "You better get some sleep. Morning, Slim."

"Morning, sugar." That was the way they always said goodbye. Maxine felt the tenseness return as Jake went out the door. Must it always be like this? But she had improved. She really had. Hadn't she? She hadn't ever lost control of herself since she had been going with Jake. She hadn't ever cried over anything that had happened between them. That was certainly true. Not physically, she hadn't.

At four o'clock in the morning the city had one eye closed, but it never shut them both. It merely rested them one at a time. Slightly disturbed by something he couldn't quite place in Maxine, Jake ducked under the stairs leading to the basement of the tenement in the tin-can-filled back yard, splattered with rubbish and dog excrement . . . suck it in. Pull it in, don't let it out . . . trap it. Swallow, put your hands over your face so it can't escape. Breathe hard — it will give you a flight . . . the hard red glare.

7

JAKE'S ROOM was neat. It had the look of being seldom occupied. He rubbed the frosty encrusted traces of sleep

from his eyes and turned on the radio to station WYBZ to listen to "Willard Sadder and His Mad Discs of Platter." There were two metal closets in the left corner of the room where Jake kept his wardrobe. He had seven suits: three bold-look, single-breasted sharkskins, one dark blue double-breasted conservative cut — the only dark suit in his wardrobe — a single-breasted tan, a double-breasted gray flannel, and a single-breasted gray flannel. He had five pair of shoes: a pair of black patent leather loafers, three \$21 suedes with single white threads running around the top of the soles, and a \$25 pair of brown Stacey Adams, with a single thread of white around the soles. He had four weskits of various designs, a large assortment of Slim Jim ties of striped and solid patterns, twenty-five pairs of Argyle socks, and ten pairs of ribs. He also had ten pairs of \$25 Dak french-waisted trousers. He had only three sport coats, but they cost \$55 apiece and looked it. His three gaucha-styled jackets — with the elastic waists, zipper in front and hand-stitched flaps over the pockets — were favorites for all guys in the know, and of these three his gray suede was the coolest. Of course, he had some stingy-brim hats, and a french-styled houndstooth topcoat with raglan sleeves. Two belt-in-the-back heavy topcoats assured him that he would be in style when winter set in. There was also a tuxedo which he had not worn since graduating from high school a year ago.

His wardrobe was the envy of all the cats on the corners, and caught the eye of all the babes and he knew it. He had a physique made to hang clothes on, and knew that too. He had Maxine, who half the guys on Welch Street would give their right arm to have, and another little girl, who really sent him, on the verge of becoming his. He had a car, and money coming in every day. He was sitting on top of the

world, and that was a damn good place to be. Maxine was crazy to think he wouldn't be satisfied with all of that. Who wouldn't be?

Erroll Garner was giving out with "Pastel" and in the midst of the enraptured spell of the music, Jake decided he was hungry. He threw back the army blanket that served as a spread and sprang out of bed. After reaching over on the lamp table and turning the radio up loud, he slipped into wooden shower-shoes and clomped into the bathroom across the hall. Jake's was one of the few houses in that part of town that had a shower as well as a bathtub. Jake had had it installed and was proud of that.

After showering, he cooked a breakfast of ham and eggs. Louis Jordan's "Run Joe" calypsoed from the radio and he drummed his hands to the music. After cleaning up the kitchen, he read the note left by his father. Jake smiled at the last lines in the message. "I wish you wouldn't stay out so late at night. You're going to get into trouble yet. Knock up some gal or something. I should have straightened you out long ago. Too late now, you're a man now . . ." Jake knew his old man had raised a lot of hell in his day. His mother, when she had been living, had often told him about his father. Must be getting wilder than my old man, he mused, him worrying about me like that. For the past week the old man had been preaching, mainly by note, for they seldom saw each other except on weekends, or on rare occasions when Jake came home for supper. Going out the door to pick up the groceries his father had requested, Jake suddenly ran back and shut off the radio, cutting off Sarah's "Everything I Have Is Yours." A good song, he thought. A damn good song. That was just how he felt about the world. Everything it had was his. He looked at himself in the vanity mirror and decided his hair was not exactly to his

liking. He primped until his thick black hair lay in slightly kinky curls. He pushed the part so that his hair rose straight up to the top of his head. He pushed the hair that jutted over his forehead back an eighth of an inch or so, and pinched the front part square. He rechecked himself in the mirror. He had the perfect crew cut, a half inch of hair perfectly flat on top. It was square in the back, on the sides, where the part divided it on the side, all around. He smiled. He couldn't help wondering about his old man. He wouldn't be trying to lay down the law, would he? The absurdity of the question changed the smile on his face into a grin. His father never tried to interfere in his activities. Once, a year ago, he asked Jake where was he getting so much money. Jake told him a woman was giving it to him. His old man shook his head, muttered something about those damn women, and said nothing more about it. Even when Jake had started buying a lot of clothes, and a car last month, his father had not reopened the subject, except on one occasion when he had said "Those damn women sure getting good to you lately. I'll be glad when some woman tames you and makes you settle down."

"Is that what happened to you?" Jake had said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Aw, go out and play with some bitch," his old man had said.

Jake checked his golden Longines, with the blue crystal, with the electric clock on the mantelpiece. He set the watch back two minutes. It was slightly chilly outside. He'd better wear the gray suede over the charcoal gray jersey with the striped collar. He pulled on the jacket, placed a gray stingy brim on his head, and caught a final glance at himself going out the room — sharp!

THE GARVELIS had been in business on the northwest corner of Peabody Avenue for sixteen years. They were some of the few whites who still lived in the steadily expanding black belt. The black belt had spread ten miles in each direction in the last twenty years, and the white families had fled, to avoid the plague, farther west and north, so that now the downtown district was almost completely surrounded by Negro communities. The Caucasians had to come alarming distances to go to work and to shop.

Pop Garveli was working among stacks of cans, built neatly in rows on the floor, that rose almost up to the level of his five-foot-six beefy frame.

"Come on, Pop, I'm late," his daughter Georgia said. "Pop" was not a family endearment. The name had become fastened to Papaseppe Garveli by the neighborhood, which was quickly convinced his first name was too long and difficult to pronounce, and so he had been "Pop" from almost the first day he opened for business in the then salt-and-pepper neighborhood.

"Hi Pop," Jake said.

"'Lo Jake."

"Hi Jake, you look real cute in that outfit. Doesn't he look cute?" Georgia said teasingly.

"Yeah, sure does. Looks real sharp, as you cats say," Pop added with a good-natured grin. The Garvelis were friendly. That explained, in part, how they managed to do a thriving business in the neighborhood. There seemed to be an unwritten law among the youngsters, who were notorious for stealing, to pound the hell out of local merchants but never Pop Garveli, and the neighborhood, living on credit and constantly in conflict with merchants because of unpaid bills, always paid Pop; most always anyway.

"You in a hurry, Jake?"

"Naw, Pop, sure ain't."

"Tell you what, how 'bout holding down the fort while I take Georgia to school before she has a nervous breakdown?"

"Oh Pop," Georgia said.

"Sure, Pop," Jake said.

"Bye, Jake."

"Later, Georgia." Jake sat down in a chair by the vegetable bin and picked up one of Georgia's comic books, an epic featuring Superman in a struggle with a mad scientist. Jake had been almost like one of the family with the Garvelis. From the time he was seven until he started high school at thirteen, Jake had worked for Pop. He had often eaten supper with them at their insistence, and on occasions gone on outings where curious glances of both races had marked their activities. Georgia had been as close as a sister to Jake, who was an only child, but this relationship had been buried beneath social codes during the last four years and the fondness they felt toward each other was now blunted. Jake was not alone in his fondness for the Garvelis. The whole neighborhood seemed warm to their presence and forgave them the most unpardonable crimes. Once, a few years back, Jake and a group of friends were lounging, as usual, under the corner lamppost around ten-thirty at night when the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Garveli carried quite easily from the bedroom window to the loungers below. Mrs. Garveli, quite obviously as high as her husband, objected to the hat her husband had bought that evening. A native of Texas, Mrs. Garveli slipped now and then, especially when drunk, into the language common in her home town. Mrs. Garveli, in a voice that carried clearly from the bedroom window down to Jake and his friends, shouted, "I don't see why the hell you had to go buy a straw hat with a yellow band. You ought to know by

this time don't nobody wear straw hats but you and the niggers."

Instead of taking offense Jake and the boys laughed at this. The tale spread through the neighborhood and business boomed, a far cry from situations in other stores where racial sentiments, unconsciously or in a fit of anger expressed, led to boycotts or freezeouts that had caused more than one store over the years to fold.

At sixteen Georgia was getting cute, Jake thought. The buds on her chest had blossomed, her legs had filled out, and her auburn hair, cut short in the current poodle-cut craze, looked good on her. She had better watch out, Jake mused. All the boys at Creighton High will be trying to make her. He grinned at the thought of Georgia handling or mishandling the situation. That was the way he thought of Georgia then.

When Pop returned, Jake rounded up his groceries and paid Pop from his own pocket. He was feeling good. Last year this time, they had been credit customers.

"How's the old school?" Pop said.

"Same, only it's getting more crowded all the time."

"Ought to build another or send everybody to the same schools. Now —"

"Yeah, Pop, see you," Jake said, embarrassed as always when they happened to get on one of those topics.

9

JAKE GOT OFF the streetcar at Fourteenth and Olivette. He walked briskly into the plush showroom of the Carson Buick

Dealers. The Dynaflo was ready. He had to take it back last week because something was wrong with the steering wheel.

In the Dynaflo, with a tank full of gas, Jake felt like he had just climbed off a stick of tea . . . in the clouds, you're living, he told himself.

Half an hour later he pulled up across the street from Marshall High. Scar, standing on the southwest corner of Bishop Street, directly across the street from the school, sang a few bars of Stan Kenton's "Dynaflo" in a loud, off-key voice. Most of the fellows hung around across the street from the school waiting for the girls to come out, because the police seemed too happy to use cave man persuasion to show the "Young Punks" they shouldn't hang around on school grounds.

"'Lo Jake."

"What' going on?" Jake opened the door and Scar got in. The guys gathered around.

"Hey, Jake, why you get a black Dyna?" Red piped. Red was short and thin, and a junkie.

"To be different, you know all colored folks like red."

The guys laughed. "That's me," Red said.

"Hey, Jake, who's Miss Big Stockings the boys tell me you done latched onto?"

"Man, she's tough," Jake said, not revealing her name and getting wound up for the coming bull session.

"Yeh."

Out of the eight guys gathered around the car, the only blank expression in the crowd belonged to Scar. He sat in the front seat with Jake, a knowing look in his eyes, detached, unimpressed.

"Built like a brick . . ." The guys cut off Jake's comment with laughter.

"Aw, who in hell is interested in a babe built like a crap house?" one of the guys said.

"Jealousy," Jerry sang and got one of the few laughs of his career.

"What a swing on that frame. Big headlights and a sexy fishtail," Jake said. Unlike in the old days, he was not enjoying talking about Armenta in this way. In the old days this had been part of the fun in having a girl. Building her up in the fellows' eyes and then watching them look at you in envy when you walked down the street with her. In fact, going to bed with a babe didn't mean nothing if you couldn't tell the boys. Of course he never openly bragged about who he was going to bed with, he was too cool for that. He just let the fellows sort of draw their own conclusions and didn't bother to deny it, and besides people talked, it didn't take them long to find out what you were doing, if you didn't try to cover it up.

"You mean the babe is built like one of them there — "

"Just like a Cadillac," Red said. "You know how it is with them Cads, they just *roll* away."

"Do tell," Slim Jim Willcott said, fingering the Windsor knot in his gray-and-blue-striped Slim Jim tie, pulling the corners of his mouth down and wrinkling his forehead, burlesquing an impressed countenance.

"Lawd, lawd, lawd." That was Jerry again. Dark and hefty, he had developed into a first-class guard on last year's football team, but it was doubtful he would make this year's because he had a bad habit of stopping somewhere before he got to school and not quite being able to break away.

"You ain't kidding," Red said wistfully. "Man, that broad would make a bulldog stalk an elephant with rape on its mind."

"Got me popping my shoelaces," Jake said.

"Do tell."

Jake was wishing the bell would ring, so that he could break away from the fellows without them getting the idea he didn't want to shoot the breeze. What was wrong with him anyway? A broad was a broad, what difference did it make talking about 'em? Anyway, everybody knew his reputation as a gash hound. Everybody knew Jake Adams' girls came across. Didn't he and Scar have the toughest reputation of anybody that ever went to Marshall High? The hell with it, Jake thought. A broad's a broad.

"What's the matter, Scar, the beast don't move you?" one of the guys said noticing Scar's silence.

"Not particularly."

"Try Ex-lax," Red said.

Slim Jim laughed, being the only one in the crowd not having heard Red use that expression before.

"Scar ain't so hot with women," Jerry drawled, trying in his dull-witted way to break into the humor of the thing.

"Oh yeh," Scar said. "That beast of yours doesn't think so." Scar was mixed up. He wasn't particularly angry at Jerry, it was just the way things had been going lately.

The guys laughed uneasily, watching Jerry. They knew Jerry's girl liked Scar.

"Do tell," Slim Jim said. Being a newcomer to the city, he could afford to be blasé about the thing. Neither Jake nor Scar had walked off with one of his girl friends before.

"Say, Jake, if this babe's so tough, maybe you need to devote all your time to her, so good Christian as I am, I'll do you a favor and take Maxine off your hands." That was William, the guy who had been hanging around the school for the last eight years. Nobody knew how old he was, what he did for a living, or anything about him. All they knew was that he would show up at the school every day, regardless of the weather. He, like the school, seemed to be waiting to

engulf the students. Like the school that appeared to droop a little more with each succeeding year, he just hung around on the corner.

Jake looked at Scar as if asking permission to tell one of their secrets to the crowd. "Hell, baby," he said with a wink. "Any babe of mine you can get, take. I always say, if a man does his job right, he ain't got nothing to worry about. If he don't, he might as well forget it."

"Amen," Scar said nodding his head solemnly. That was the truest thing Jake had said today.

"And the bedroom's your battleground," Red said.

"Amen."

"I ain't lost a battle there yet," Jake said.

"Do tell."

A loud, clattering bell broke up the bull session.

"You guys take it slow," Jake said pulling off.

"Play it cool man, play it cool," Red said, turning his hands palms upward and looking dreamingly up in the air as if expecting something to fall into them.

Jake stopped in front of the steps leading up to the main doors of the school. Students streamed out of the peeling, red-painted brick schoolhouse like lava oozing down a mountainside. They came, a rainbow of colors thundering down the steps in a crescendo of confusion, the din of hundreds going somewhere and all talking at the same time.

"Marilyn doesn't think I saw her trying to talk herself in with Joe," a dumpy, bobby-soxed girl said to her feminine companion, "the bitch. Hi, Joel"

They came out of the school in the uniforms of the teenage set. The girls wore slacks and pedal pushers of all patterns and designs. They wore white shirts with jeans and bobby sox, and dirty black and white saddle oxfords. They wore tight-fitting sweaters, with wide belts and pencil skirts

which had slits in the sides. They wore sloppy Joe sweaters and corduroy skirts, and blouses that looked like printed newspaper sewn together, that had headlines and catchy sayings printed on the material. They wore checked vests and their legs and arms were adorned with identification bracelets. Girls who were debts for teen-age gangs wore berets, with identifying letters of the organization sewn on the headpiece, and sweaters with emblems of the gang their boy friends belonged to. Some of the girls wore school sweaters chiseled from some athlete. A few girls came dressed up in high-heeled pumps, box-back suits, and shortie coats.

The boys wore sweaters and levi's, or corduroy trousers. They wore sport shirts with outer-seamed or hand-stitched pants and suede belts of a variety of colors. Their shoes were leather, or suede, with double white threads stitched along the soles. They were partial to checkered weskits, bold New Look suits, Slim Jim ties, and spread-collar shirts. They strutted in checkered sport coats and gaucho-styled jackets. Their heads were crowned with stingy-brim hats, or the large-brim type which they wore unblocked and pulled down on their ears, or they wore the beret patterned after Diz Gillespie. They wore fancy tie clasps and carried long, black umbrellas, regardless of the weather, and multi-colored, encased pool sticks . . . they were sharp, gone, in the know . . .

Armenta finally came whirling down the steps in the shouting crowd. She was wearing the maroon-and-white school sweater with a track letter on it. Her head, with the black, glossy hair bobbing up and down, vanished and reappeared in the sea of people. Once Jake, watching her head go down, almost thought it wasn't coming up again.

"Short people sure have a hard time."

"Yeh," Scar said. "'Specially if they're girls."

At the bottom of the steps a curly-haired, mustache-

sprouting, thin guy in beret and shades, a popular type of sunglasses, grabbed Armenta as she was passing by.

"Leggo," she said.

"Oo-wee, baby, will I ever?"

"Not you, baby, you'll never."

The exchange of conversation drifted to Jake and Scar.

"That's my girl," Jake told Scar.

"How you gonna sound, baby, how you gonna sound!"

"Like a Cadillac, baby, shoom!"

"Or like a Dynaflo," Jake said coming over from the car.

"Hands off."

"Who sez?"

"I sez. Maybe if I rub your face off on the sidewalk you'll understand better," Jake said quietly.

"Jake."

"Quiet, babe, I'll handle this."

"She your girl?"

"That's her business," Jake said in an even softer, matter-of-fact tone. "You better make it yours to lay off. Don't even speak, you dig? Unless she wants to talk to you; in that case, that's her business and I ain't got nothing to do with it."

"You ain't got nothing to do with it now. Think you tough, huh? 'Cause you got your boys," he said looking at Scar. "Cootal!" The battle cry rang out over the multitude of voices. Six guys pushed their ways swiftly through the crowd. They wore blue sweaters with gray barracuda fish on the chest. They swaggered in the manner of the tough guys on the blocks. Their walk was the gait of corner boys. The handkerchiefs tied around their fists said they meant business.

"No, Jake," Armenta said as Jake's double fist flashed through the air and crashed into the tip of the guy's nose.

"What you so hot about, Jake?" a guy with a conk, thick lips and slits for eyes said, pulling the guy with the shades away from Jake.

"What the hell you pulling me away for?" the guy whined. "He's the one looking for a war!"

"He didn't mean no harm," the guy with the conk said. "Take it slow, Jake. See you man. Let's go you guys! Come on Shades." The Cooters swaggered away in the manner of a tough club.

"You don't watch that punk, you'll see me sooner than that."

"He didn't mean no harm," the guy said pushing Shades ahead of him.

"Then I don't mean none."

"Later, man."

"Take it slow, Slits."

With the blood now splashing on his checkered vest, Shades tried to get away from the restraining arms of the Cooters. "But, but, Slits —"

"Shut up, you stupid bastard," Slits whispered hoarsely. "That's Jake Adams you fixing to war with."

"You mean the president of the Termites?"

"He was, till he got out of the club. Mix with him, you got the whole club down on our necks. We ain't fixing to rumba with the T's, not yet we ain't."

Shades looked at Slits, not knowing what to say. He took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his nose. The Barracudas pushed their way further into the crowd.

"Jake Adams, you're awful!" Armenta said, meaning it.

"What was I supposed to do, stand there and watch him paw you?" Jake opened the door of the Dynaflow.

"Boy, you have an awful temper," Armenta said.

"His bark's worse than his bite," Scar said.

"Jake, I don't want you fighting over me."

"I wasn't fighting over you, I was fighting for you."

"I don't get you?"

"I wasn't fighting 'cause I was trying to keep somebody

from getting next to you, I just didn't want him bothering you if you didn't want to be bothered."

"You're a funny guy." She was laughing now, the wind whipping through the lowered windows of the car stirring up her hair. The Dynaflo cruised through the street. There was an intoxicating aroma about Armenta that took Jake's breath away. It was something like a faint whiff of Jergens lotion mixed with the smell of rolls baking in the oven. There was the smell of woman about her, but it was a very clean smell. It did things to Jake. The smell was not a store-bought perfume. It was Armenta. She was after him again about his temper, a faint pout on her lips, her teeth glittering with the sunlight, conviction gleaming in her eyes. She tried to make him promise not to fight any more. He scared the life out of her by suddenly taking both hands off the steering wheel and kissing her flush on the lips.

"Can't you be quiet," he said.

She pushed her glossy hair back away from her eyes. He told her she looked like a shaggy dog who needed a haircut. She told him he seemed to like it. She had something there. They cruised through the streets both trying to outtalk the other. Finally, they compromised. He said he wouldn't fight, especially in front of her, unless it couldn't be helped. Scar lay at rest, as he had been for the past ten minutes, his stingy brim pulled down over his eyes, his head resting comfortably on the back of the seat.

10

AFTER DROPPING OFF Armenta and Scar, Jake drove back over Peabody Avenue. The kids were out in their Lone Ranger

and Hopalong Cassidy cowboy suits. Their silver cap pistols glistened in the sun. The kids swarmed over the neighborhood. They shot marbles in back yards that had not seen grass for years. A few tried to fly kites but the wind was not high enough. They tied long rags over their shoulders and played Superman and Captain Marvel, hopping from coalshed to coalshed, jumping to the ground below, sometimes from sheds a story and a half in height. They wrestled on weed-filled lots, played sandlot football, and killed each other in cowboy and Indian ambuscades. The neighborhood rang with their shrill voices. They roared through the streets on skates, or on two-by-fours nailed together at right angles, with skate wheels nailed underneath, which they called skate trucks. They crowded the alleys playing a game called cork-ball. It was played with two teams composed of three men, a pitcher, a catcher, and a backstop. You tried to hit a tennis ball with a broomstick and if the catcher caught the ball after you swung and missed, you were out. As always at this time of day Peabody Avenue belonged to the kids. So every night Gussy's father beat hell out of his ole lady, so Gertrude's sister was a hustler on the corners, so the Simpsons were threatened with eviction, so Joe didn't go to school half of the time because he was ashamed of his clothes and Moses' brother was rotting in jail, so Wino Jepe made Louie's twelve-year-old sister and the landlord wouldn't fix the busted toilet pipes in the tenement down the street . . . lawd, one of these days goin' to move, way out. Way out on the outskirts of town . . .

Jake turned on the radio and caught the last hour of the Mad Platter show. From four to four-thirty was the Boogy Joogy section, strictly for the squares.

We're playing this boogy, we're playing a boogy woogy that rocks. We're playing this boogy, we're playing it for the bobby sox.

Roy Milton's Solid Senders jammed away on the frantic notes of jazz. It was one of the few square pieces Jake went for. At four-thirty would come the cool sounds, a mingling of mostly bop and progressive jazz, with a few performers like Nellie Lutcher, Louis Jordan, and Ruth Brown thrown in, who belonged to the corn-bread crowd, but were considered good listening by the guys in the know.

Old man Adams came home promptly at six, as usual, and was surprised to find Jake there. "Man, I'm beat," he said. He hung his work coat in the hall closet and put on his house shoes. "Why don't you stir up some chow, since you're here?"

"Sure," Jake said, pleased at the request because his old man usually considered anything he cooked unfit to eat. Jake would have liked to prepare something fancy, but knew his father would rather settle for a can of pork and beans and some more of the ham he had eaten for breakfast.

"That damn factory's getting me down, sometimes I don't think I can make that other five years before I retire."

Jake was silent. He knew better than to tell his father he could get him a good deal, maybe even a small business or something. He wasn't kidding himself either. He knew Monk could swing it, but more than likely his old man would swing on him.

Old man Adams was too proud to take help from anybody. That was one of the things that made it difficult for him to talk to his son, since it was obvious Jake was doing much better than he was. How could a father tell his son to give up all of that and come back to the kind of life he was living a few years ago? Besides, he couldn't actually say Jake was doing anything wrong. Gambling, women — hell, all young studs did that. Jake just happened to be able to turn those situations to his advantage. What was so wrong with that? He's a Adams all right, no doubt about that. He fought the

flicker of pride drowning his desire to bawl Jake out as he originally intended doing whenever he caught up with him. What the hell, he decided. It could wait until another time.

11

JAKE ARRIVED over at Armenta's by eight as he had promised.

"Hi," she said in her low voice, taking him by the hand. "Come on in." Armenta lived on Merchant Place, out west in the better neighborhood. It was out of Jake's territory. The colonial-style two-story brick house was bright with chandeliers and there were warm rugs, not old and faded, on the hardwood floors.

"You got a swell crib," Jake said.

"Mom and Dad," Armenta said smiling, "this is Jake Adams."

Armenta's father was tall and wiry, with features that seemed to be molded in copper. He had dense, black curly hair. "Hello, young man," he said stiffly. He had a faint accent Jake couldn't place.

"We're glad to meet you, Jake; you must come to see us more often." That was Armenta's mother. She was short, like Armenta. Her face was still youthful, but her body was beginning to show the lines of a middle-aged spread. Jake thought he saw in her what Armenta would look like thirty years from now.

"That your car outside, young man?" Mr. Arnez said.

"Yes it is, Mr. Arnez."

"Humph, must have a pretty good job to afford that."

"Daddy, you promised," Armenta said with distress in her voice.

"Come on, Henry, let's let the young people be." Armenta's mother led her husband away from the front room.

"But Edna, my favorite program's on now."

"Henry," she said firmly. Her voice drifted from the hallway. "He seems like a nice boy."

"Seems like he could have picked a better time to come visiting. S'after eight o'clock."

Mrs. Arnez laughed. "Oh, Henry," she said. "If he had come by earlier, you would have sworn he came to eat supper with us."

Jake listening from the front room could not help commenting, "I don't think your old man likes me."

"Oh, Daddy's just upset cause you didn't call him 'sir,'" Armenta said.

"This is the twentieth century, babe. Nobody expects to be called 'sir' nowadays."

"Daddy's a throwback. He thinks it's disrespectful if young people don't say 'sir.'"

"You say 'sir' to him?"

"Of course."

"Well, I'll be damn," Jake said. "Where's your old man from anyway?"

"Oh, forget about Daddy," Armenta said, pulling Jake down beside her on the davenport. "Can't you think of better things to talk about?" They were very close. That smell had him again. He felt uncomfortable, like he was being used for a pincushion, especially the way she was looking at him. "You like B and Sassy?"

"Natch."

"How 'bout Pres and Bird?"

"Crazy," Jake said. "Got anything by Miles, Ventura, Diz, or Kenton?"

"Natch." She smiled at him.

"You're a pretty *down* ole babe."

"I live in the twentieth century," Armenta said matter-of-factly.

"Your old man, he's strictly — " Jake drew a huge square in the air with his index fingers.

To her surprise Armenta found herself laughing. "Lay off, will you. I like my old man, even if he is — " She made the square with her fingers.

"How 'bout me?"

"I like you too, Jake," she said demurely. "Dig this crazy jam, I bet you never heard this." She walked across the room and placed a record on the turntable of the huge combination radio and record-playing set. The record she played was an instrumental, featuring a tenor sax with a tone that caught Jake's fancy, and some terrific execution.

"Who's that?" Jake asked. "Sounds like Pres on tenor."

"Getz."

"Who?"

"Stan Getz, played with Woody. Remember 'Early Autumn'?"

"Getz, that his name? Yeh, I remember his drift. He's tough. What's the name of the jam?"

"Sweety Pie."

"Sharp. Dig him the most to say the least."

They had a session via the record player. Now and then they danced, especially when Sarah Vaughan or Billy Eckstine sang, but mostly they just sat and listened. Armenta played all the killers from Bird on down. She had a record of Thelonious Monk, but both confessed they weren't *down* enough to understand it. "You're my kind of babe," Jake said.

"From what I hear about you, all girls are your kind of babe."

"Well, I've always liked girls," Jake admitted. "One of

those unexplained mysteries of life. I guess I'm just funny that way."

He had her laughing again. "So I hear."

"You seem to hear an awful lot. Where you hear all of this?"

"At school," Armenta said. "A lot of the girls talk about you, especially Geneva and Flordell. They make me sick. Every time I go down the hall, all I hear is you."

Jake decided to change the subject. "You the only child?"

"No, I've got five sisters."

"Five."

"Yep, my old man and Eddie Cantor."

"Where are they?"

"Married. I'm the baby of the family."

"You're my baby," Jake said.

She told him about her sisters. Two had married doctors. Joyce, who was twenty-seven and the oldest, was married to a famous lawyer in Milwaukee. Sue had married a college professor and was considered the black sheep of the family, and Wilma, who was only twenty and next to Armenta in age, was somewhere in Africa with her missionary husband.

"Jim!" Jake said. "Don't you people like plain, ordinary folks?"

"Not to marry," Armenta said. "Daddy would never approve of it."

"Well, I'll be damn," Jake said. "S'cuse me for cussing, but I'll be damn! What is your man anyway? I mean what does he do?"

"He's in real estate."

"He the Henry Arnez head of the Arnez Real Estate Agency?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'll be damn. I thought he was a white man."

"He's West Indian," Armenta said.

"Don't make a damn bit of difference. He ain't white. Well, I'll be damn." It was all he could say.

"You haven't changed much, Jake Adams."

"What you mean?"

"You always were awful."

"I don't dig, babe. You sound like you been knowing me all my life."

"I've known you long enough," she said. "Since grade school."

"You're mad, woman," Jake said, not believing her.

"Like hell —" she caught herself, noticing the mocking expression on Jake's face. "I mean — you can make me so mad at times Jake Adams," she raged at him. "I used to be one of those little girls that used to stand around and watch you all the time in grade school. You used to get into so much trouble."

"In grade school, huh?"

"And high school."

"I didn't never see you. How long you been living in this town?"

"All my life."

"I didn't never see you. How long you — I don't see how I missed something as cute as you."

"I used to be bashful," she said.

"You ain't now."

"I outgrew it."

"I still don't see how I missed you," Jake said.

"Well, the fact remains, I used to like you."

"You mean you don't now?" Jake said, raising an eyebrow.

"I used to expect to hear about you being put in jail every day, when you ran around with those awful Termites."

"I didn't run around with them — I was President," Jake said, unable to keep the pride out of his voice.

"Well, I'm glad you don't run with them any more."

"That's kid stuff," Jake said. "I'm too old now."

"Was that kid stuff this afternoon?"

"That punk made me hot," Jake said. "I'd get mad behind anybody goofing over you."

Armenta was flattered though she didn't feel she should be. "Then you should be mad at yourself," she teased.

"For what?"

"For ignoring me all these years."

"I didn't know you existed."

"I don't see why not. I thought you said I was cute," she pouted.

"You are cute. You know you're a good-looking babe. You see yourself every day in the mirror. How come I never met you before, anyway?"

"I told you, I was bashful. Anyway, Rudolph held me pretty tight in high school."

"That whose sweater you wearing?"

"Yes."

"He's a good track man," Jake said. "So you're the Armenta he was always talking about. Man, he used to talk about you like you was a queen or something. How come I never saw you with him?"

"You were too busy flirting with other people."

"Where's Rudolph now?" Jake wanted to know.

"In college."

"Where at?"

"Lincoln, that's where I'm going after I graduate in June."

"Yeah!" Jake's left eyebrow was rising again.

"It's not like you think. I'm going to get an education."

"Lots of people consider that an education."

"You have a nasty, lowbrow mind," Armenta said. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Simple," he said. "'Cause I like you and you like me." He kissed her then. Her mouth opened only slightly under

his, her arms remained in her lap, her eyes open, her lips cold.

"That the way you do Maxine, just grab and kiss her?"

"What's Maxine got to do with this?" It was the only thing he knew to say. He hadn't known she knew about Maxine.

"She's your girl friend, isn't she?"

"She's a girl that's a friend of mine."

"That's just it, Jake," she said briskly. "All girls are just friends of yours. You got too many friends."

"What you looking for — a little dream cottage with a white picket fence around it?"

"Maybe, but any guy that was my ole man, I'd like to know he was mine and not every clutching female's that happened along."

So there it was; he hadn't met a girl yet that didn't want to put the ball and chain on him, stick a sign on his back saying Hands off, I own him, don't touch. "What makes you think you're woman enough to hold a man strictly to you?"

"Sometimes I wonder if you're enough man."

"I don't dig you."

"Sometimes I think you run around seeing how many babes you can make, as you call it, to prove to yourself that you're a man, that there's nothing wrong with you."

Jake flushed. Most of what she said he knew to be true. It was what happened to a guy when he was poor and looked around and found out the whole world wasn't like that. It made you want things. You wanted a lot of clothes, a big shiny car, money, and plenty of babes, unless you were a square. You had to prove you were somebody, didn't you? "You got me wrong," Jake said simply. "I really go for you. I have ever since the first time I dug — " He watched the smirk creep across her face. "Aw forget it." He got up. "I'll see you," he said.

She followed him to the door. Once he turned, then

thought better of it and continued out the door. "Armenta —" He felt like hell, he was fumbling around like a stud on his first date or something. No girl had ever done that to him before, made him feel like that. He turned at the door to tell her goodbye. She kissed him then. Her tongue set the roof of his mouth on fire. "Why did you do that?" he said.

"That's for the way it might have been, Jake."

He stood looking at the big oaken door she vanished behind. He drove away cursing the choking sensation in his throat.

The bitch is nuts, he told himself, but in his mind she was not degraded. He drove out to the park. The park was filled with cars crawling lazily along the winding lanes or parked silently along the curbs. Couples sprawled in the grass on blankets or clinched on the benches. The low murmur of voices and the rustle of garments was the sound of the park. Jake drove around Dead Man's Curve and parked in front of the water fountain. The water fountain was a shower of lights. The lights a disc of fuzzy colors. The colors shimmered in the night changing from red to orange to yellow, fading into a rainbow of colors. The city boasted of its water fountain with the shower of colored lights. The moon hung low in the sky, right beneath a scant gathering of clouds in the otherwise starlit sky. You could see the man in the moon on the moon's surface. He could forget any broad. A broad was like a streetcar, you could always catch the next one. He didn't understand Armenta. How did you handle something like that? She was a dame; all broads were mostly the same, weren't they? The hell with it, it wasn't worth trying to figure out. He wasn't going to let her get under his skin, that was for damn sure. The broad hadn't been born that could steal the heart of Jake Adams. He stayed out in the park a long time watching the colored lights change in the shower. He sat silently just watching the colors.

SPIDER AND EVELYN sat on the warped steps of her front porch. The top of the moon appeared just above the ragged flats across the street. A lone firefly circled the broken picket fences along the block.

"He's out early this year," Evelyn said watching the firefly.

"Yeh," Spider said solemnly. "That's where we should be, out!"

"It's nice to stay home sometimes. Isn't it nice outdoors tonight?"

"I don't like to stay at home," Spider said. "It gives me the creeps."

Evelyn didn't say anything. She knew all too well what Spider meant. She often got that feeling herself. Seeing the rundown neighborhood rubbing itself away on each new generation, and looking about her in the flat where she and her parents stayed, knowing it looked just as shabby, if not worse than the other houses on the block. She remembered her mother saying they couldn't afford to have any more children. She remembered the bread and sweet cakes, sometimes, that her father used to bring home, that the bakers used to give him when he worked on the garbage truck for the city. He had a more respectable job now, as janitor in one of the grade schools, only no cake any more. She thought, if her father didn't drink so much, and gamble all the time, they could be living in a better neighborhood. It wasn't children her mother and father couldn't afford. Her father was always talking about buying a house out somewhere, away from the riffraff as he called it. He was always talking about getting lucky someday, and winning a lot of money. I can feel it coming, he was always saying. One thing was sure, they were always broke. Her mother wouldn't let her put any of her money in the house, though. She tried to see

to it that her husband didn't borrow money from Evelyn, but now and then he did. Evelyn couldn't turn him down, even when she knew she wasn't going to ever see it again.

"What you thinking?" Spider said.

"Oh, nothing. I wish we could get away from here."

"We will."

"We won't live around here, will we, Bert? Our house won't be anything like this?"

"Hell, no!" Spider said. "Only the best. We're going to live. We're going to really pop."

That was what she liked about Spider. He was so sure, so certain of everything. The only trouble was she couldn't see him actually doing anything to make their dreams come true. She realized with a shock, he was something like her father. She shuddered when he kissed her, and pushed him away.

"What's the matter? What you do that for?"

"I didn't mean it, Bert," Evelyn said. "I'm tired, I think I should go to bed, so I'll feel like going to work tomorrow."

"We both should," Spider said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean. When a guy plays it straight with a babe all the time like I do, she should treat him right."

"Don't I treat you right?"

"I guess," Spider said. "But I just stay excited about you all the time, I can't help it. I guess that's just the way I am."

"I'm glad that's the way you are," Evelyn said.

THE FRONT TABLE in Booker's was crowded with guys playing New York, even Booker was in on it, but Scar was leaning against the wall trying to get his eyes in focus. Scar knew he should be in on it. It would be weeks before they got that many guys in the game again. He could really clean up, but he wasn't up to it. He was sick. He was sick as hell. Those guys were good for at least twenty skins. That thought didn't make him feel better. So Scar leaned against the wall and tried to watch the game, think about the game, anything but admit to himself what was wrong with him. It was a tough game, all right, you had to admit that. A perfect sucker's game because they never realized they couldn't win — the pain again, gnawing at him, demanding to be fed . . . Don't think about it, think about something else, anything else. The pool game, New York, the perfect sucker's game. You played it with pills, up to eight guys play in it. You shook the leather container and dropped out two pills that held the number of the balls you were supposed to make. You had to run the balls from the one up to the sixteen or backwards in order to get to the balls that had the same number as the pills. Naturally the suckers thought it was a game of luck, that the guy who pulled the pills closest to either end would win. But like all games that involved skill, the guy who could execute the best was going to come out on top — but it wasn't any use in thinking, he needed a fix, he had to get one quick. He tried to straighten up, look natural, before the fellows noticed what was really wrong with him, before they tagged him a junkie like they had done Red. But it wasn't any use, he couldn't concentrate on anything. He didn't even see Jake come in the door.

"What's the happenings, man," Jake said, coming over to

him. Jake didn't like the way Scar was looking. There was something about that look. Jake didn't want to admit to himself what it was. Just then Monk came in — white man in the black belt.

"'Lo Monk."

"Hey Booker, hi fellas. Come out to the car a minute, will ya kid," Monk said to Jake.

Outside Monk got in the front seat of his Lincoln and Jake got in beside him. "How you doing?" Monk said.

"Fine," Jake said.

"Got a heavier load this time, think you can handle it?"

"You know me," Jake said.

"I think I do," Monk said, looking him in the eye. "You stick with me, kid, I'll see you straight. Little more grooming and you'll be ready for the big time." He punched Jake playfully in the ribs. "Got four hundred skins of stuff; you got the bread or want me to stake you till you clear?"

Jake got a boost from that. Wasn't many guys Monk would let have junk without cash on the line. In fact, it wasn't many guys Monk would let push for him. Jake admired Monk, he was a smooth operator. "Sure," Jake said.

"Look," Monk cautioned. "Besides Pod, Boy and Girl, got some Coke with this load. Sniffers coming into the Paradise Saturday. They got into a jam with the locals last place they gigged, so you got to play it chilly. They might still be hot."

"Thought you ran the force in this town," Jake said.

"Not yet, but I will."

"I'll watch it," Jake said.

Monk handed Jake the package. This was the risky part, the exchange, if the bims should happen along right now — Monk pulled off and Jake hastily got into his Dynaflo with the package and stashed it under the front seat. He knew he wouldn't feel safe until he had placed it under the boards

in his room at home. He stood to make over two hundred on this run, maybe two hundred and twenty-five. That was seventy skins more than he ever made before. This was going to be a tough week, he concluded. There was pod for the light heads, boy and girl for the mainliners and now snow for the sniffers. He was branching out, and he didn't run much risk, because all of his trade were established contacts of Monk's, mostly entertainers that came in every week. That was the way Monk worked it. He told Jake who to push, anyone else was taboo. Their organization wasn't like the others, the guys that fed anybody's habit; with these guys a pusher never lasted long.

Scar came out of the poolroom and over to where Jake was parked. "Man I'm sick," he said.

"What's the matter, Scar?" Jake said, knowing all the time.

"Son-of-a-bitch sold me some lemonade," Scar said having a hard time talking. "Four cents for the plunge, and it's lemonade."

Four cents, then Scar wasn't just starting on the kick. He wondered what Scar was going to do when he got up to fifteen and twenty a day which would happen eventually, if he didn't kill himself first trying to break off the habit. He helped Scar inside the car.

"Son-of-a-bitch. Man I'm busted."

"Take it easy, Scar."

"Man, I'm popping my cap."

"Easy, Scar."

"My wig is split," Scar moaned.

Jake drove around in the alley in the back of Welch Street, pulled over to a coalshed and cut the lights. Somewhere in that long tunnel of darkness, angry curses . . . nickel I shoot . . . winos, gambling with each other, each trying to win enough money to buy another bottle of muscatel which

all would wind up drinking. The flicker of a match in the blacked-out car — the rubber band, the heating of the spoon, the suck of the syringe, the plunge of the needle —

“Don’t look so uneasy,” Scar said when he could finally relax. “I been knowing you push.”

“How’d you know?” Jake said.

“Damn little of what you do escapes me.” Scar cut off what Jake was thinking with an impatient wave of his hand.

“Don’t worry, the cats don’t know.”

Jake did not know why, but he knew Scar knew what he was talking about. “What started you on the jive?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know,” Scar said carelessly. “Just one of those things, I guess. One day you’re not, the next, you’re on.” That was Scar talking to Jake, his best friend. Scar, who knew he started on junk because he wanted to play football in college more than anything in his life, maybe even pro ball, but he had to turn down six scholarships, any one of which he would have been glad to take. He had to go to work and take care of his invalid mother, because his father, who crippled his mother one night in a drunken rage, got killed two days after Scar graduated from high school last year when he crashed into a lamppost in another man’s car while he was drunk. His old man tore up the car and Scar’s dream. He scattered Scar’s dreams like confetti in a hurricane. And so Scar had worked in the stockyard in that animal smell, and grew bitter, and kept it to himself, and even Jake had never known how he felt. Then, one day he grew tired and wanted a lift, and not the marijuana he fooled with in high school, and Red had whispered of how terrible the mainline was, and now he was hooked, and his mother had died, and he was free to go to college, only who wanted a football player full of junk? And so he had not written to see about his chances

of getting his scholarships renewed, and so he stood around on the corners and made his living over the pool table, or with a set pair of dice, and so now he was a junkie, and didn't know how to tell the conductor to let him off. Red had been right about the mainline though.

"How much I owe you, Jake?"

"Forget it." He gave Scar a week's supply.

"I'll straighten you."

"I said forget it."

"Why don't you let me get my charge from you?"

"I don't sell junk to my best friend." Jake spat the words out as if they tasted unpleasant.

"I dig what you mean," Scar said. "I'll get unhooked yet."

Jake didn't say anything. He knew Scar meant what he said, but he didn't believe Scar could do it. Poor Scar. He drove around and let Scar out where he lived. "Later."

"S'long, Jake." That was Scar.

It wasn't the same with Maxine that night. It wasn't ever the same with Maxine after that night.

14

TWO P.M. on a sunny afternoon. Jake sat with the gang across the street from the school in the Chicken Shack, a small café that catered to the teen-age crowd, and sold hot dogs and hamburgers, french-fries, a variety of ice cream dishes and drinks, and soda pop. The Chicken Shack didn't have a chicken on the premises, or anything else in the higher price category. It was a very popular spot with the high school kids, because the jukebox had all the latest records, and there were booths where young lovers could sneak a smooch or

explore a little. Mrs. Jackson, the elderly proprietress, was called Mom by all the kids. Her place, she boasted, was like one big happy family.

"Man, dig Diz, ain't never heard a cat that could ride like he does on trumpet."

"Give me the lower register with Miles, but Diz's a crazy stud too." The guys stood around the jukebox applejacking, and hucklebucking to the music . . . *oh he's got a fine brown frame. I wonder what could be-ee-ee-ee his name . . .* Man, don't Nellie kill you?"

"She's a gas, man, a natural petrol." . . . *he looks good to me and all I can see, is his f-i-n-e, brow-w-nn frame . . .*

"Say man, you hear 'bout the crazy happening at the gas station?"

"Yeh, Ethyl got pumped."

The guys lived it up. There among the hot dogs, hamburgers, and the milkshakes sucked through straws, they smoked and held bull sessions.

"The trouble, Jake?"

"Nothing, man. Everything's crazy."

"That's the quietest I ever seen you," Spider said. Spider had on another new suit.

"You're really getting sharp," Scar said.

"Well, you know the successful man's got to look the part."

"You'll be sharp as Jake afterwhile," Scar said.

"You know me," Jake said.

"Man, I ain't never seen anybody lucky as you with the dice."

"That black boy sure got a way with them dice," Spider said, verbally patting himself on the back. They laughed good and loud.

"Keep that noise down, boy," Mom said. "I ain't running no after-hour joint."

It was the gang's turn to laugh.

"Yeh, take it slow. You get put out of here, you'll have to find a new home."

More laughter . . . *run Joe* . . . "Crazy, man. Louie's a square, but he's in there." . . . *run Joe, run Joe the man's at the do* . . . "Run Joe" calypsoed from the jukebox, its beat setting the gang's feet to racing, fingers to snapping, hands to clapping. "Run Joe" calypsoed from the jukebox, filling the small café, seeping out, spiraling gaily down the street.

"Run Joe, yo mama's done told ya," someone said.

"Yeh, I told you 'bout fugging with that pod."

It went on like that until five to three. Then everybody had to go out and greet the girls coming out from school.

"This younger generation," Mom said, hands on her hips, watching them stream out of the door.

"Come on, Jake," Scar said. "Got a new broad on the line."

"When you meet?"

"Couple nights ago at the flick."

"How come we didn't pick her up yesterday?"

"You know how I operate," Scar said. "Give 'em a few anxious moments before cutting in."

"He's not conceited," Spider said.

"Let's cut our wheels, man."

They departed behind the fleeing crowd. The guys stood on the corner in checkered vests, unblocked hats pulled down on their ears, leaning on black umbrellas, crowding the lamppost.

"Man, dig that crazy cutta on the big beast in the plaid skirt!"

THREE P.M. on a sunny afternoon. The school gave up its responsibilities for the day and turned them back over to their parents. The responsibilities rushed out going a thousand different places before going home.

"Hi, Scar," Pearl said, her big gray eyes smiling at him.

"Whoof, Miss Big Stockings herself," Scar said, making her blush as his eyes traveled her body.

"Hey Curt! Here's Scar," Pearl shouted.

"Hi, Scar," Curt said, pausing but not stopping, her thick eyebrows making a question of her face.

"Hi," Scar said. Curt continued walking, carrying her books high in her arms, swaying with a rhythm that was a part of her natural walk.

"See you," Pearl said, running after Curt. "Bye, Jake."

"Take it slow," Jake said. "Tell Curt, she didn't have to speak."

"Obviously," Scar said. "She didn't."

Spider got out of the car. "Pick me up on the corner, man."

"Who's Spider's ole lady?" Jake said.

"He's still going with Evelyn."

"Man, he's been tight with that babe ever since grade school."

"That's what happens when you get a good thing."

"They don't make 'em that good," Jake said.

"Could be they make 'em in five-foot-four packages with pretty black hair."

"You know me," Jake said. "I don't see you walking no straight and narrow."

"My time has run out," Scar said.

Jake looked at Scar, wondering what he meant, or maybe he wasn't wondering. Maybe he . . .

"There comes my beast," Scar said. "Hey Kenny!"

Kenny came over to the car. She was a dark girl, short, with a good build and attractive features. How does Scar do it? Jake wondered, looking at the long welt on Scar's face. He don't look like he's got nothing, but whatever he's got the babes know about it 'cause they sure go for him.

"How you doing?" Scar said lazily.

"Hi, Alonzo," Kenny said.

Jake laughed. Alonzo, it had been a long time since anyone called Scar by his name. "His name's Scar," Jake said.

"Down, boy. Hop in, public service at your service." Scar got out and opened the back door for Kenny to get in and got in beside her.

"This here's Jake. Jake, Kenney Waston."

"Kenny," Jake said. "Where you get that name?"

"From her parents, where you think?"

"They found the name in some book they read," Kenny said. "They liked it, so they called me Kenny."

"Yeh, well I like corn bread and mustard greens, but I won't be naming no kids that."

Scar laughed. Kenny looked at both of them, a puzzled expression twisting her sharp features.

"He's getting his kicks teasing you," Scar said laughing. "Don't let him get you down."

"Oh," Kenny said. She was smiling again now.

"You're all right, Kenny," Jake said.

"Down, boy."

"You Jake Adams?"

"Yeh."

"I heard about you."

"Who?"

"Lot of people talk about you," Kenny said. "You go with Armenta?"

"Ha!" Scar said. "Guess you'll shut up now." Scar laughed.

"I heard about you too," Kenny said.

It was Jake's turn to laugh. "Couldn't have, I'm scared of girls."

They all laughed.

"You fellows are awful."

"That's me, awful good," Scar said pulling her over and tickling her until the pout vanished. When she laughed she had dimples.

Jake and Kenny began talking, finding out what mutual friends they had. Jake started flirting again.

"Well, hell," Scar said. "Y'all seem like a good match. You should get together."

"Oh, Alonzo," Kenny said, pulling him closer to her. "Act your age."

"Sounds like a proposition," Scar said, putting his arms around her and acting as if he was going to kiss her.

She laughed, pushing him away. "You're a mannish thing."

"He's a man."

"I ain't funny, honey, if that's what you mean," Scar said in a high feminine voice. "Hey, there's Armenta. Hey, Armenta, where you going?"

"Hi, Scar," Armenta said. "Hi, Kenny — Hello, Jake."

"Hi," Jake said.

"Well, don't stand there, get in," Scar said.

Armenta looked at Jake. "I've got to —"

"Will you get in, you're holding up traffic," Scar said. "What you trying to do, stand there and upset all the little boys, put grown-up ideas in their little childish minds?"

"Get in," Jake said.

"I —"

"Get in."

"Not in back, up front. I ain't your ole man," Scar said.

"Thank God for that," Armenta said, looking at Kenny and winking.

A crowd was milling around a group of fellows on the corner. The Barracudas had found someone they didn't like.

"Those Cootas are awful," Kenny said.

"They think they are," Scar said.

"Ho, man, don't go another further," Spider yelled. He erupted out of the milling throng on the corner and ran over to the car. He got in the back with Scar and Kenny. "Hi, Kenny."

"Hi, Bert." Kenny didn't seem to like to use nicknames.

"Man, the Cootas tangled with one of the Counts. They're still working him over."

"Get stomped?"

"Yeh."

"Tough," Jake said.

"They know who to mess with," Spider said. "Don't see 'em ganging no T's."

"They're in for a hell of lot of trouble handling the Counts," Jake said.

Jake dropped Spider off first since he lived only six blocks south of the school. Kenny lived over on Bell Avenue in the same district as Maxine. He dropped Scar off with her. Kenny lived in one of those tenement houses. There were a bunch of kids milling over the decaying wooden steps. Some were shooting marbles in the front yard, playing big ring. "Hi, Sis," one of the little grubby-faced, pigtailed girls said. "Marvin, Willa, Sis's home."

"Whose' that car?"

"Don't know, sure is fine." The kids ran up to the car, putting dirty fingerprints everywhere they touched.

"Stop all that noise," Kenny said. "And you Billy and

Thomas, why don't you stay at home sometime?" she said angrily. "Mess up your own yard."

"Mama's working late tonight," Willa said. "Who's that?" she said, looking at Scar and noticing his checkered sport coat and outer-seamed trousers. "Your ole man, he's sharp."

"See you," Jake said.

"Yeh, take it slow." That was Scar.

Jake made the long drive over to the other side of town where Armenta lived.

"Bye, Jake, thanks," Armenta said, running up the steps and into the house before Jake had a chance to say anything without hollering at her and seeming foolish. Jake drove away, trying to feel gay, don't-give-a-damn. The feeling wouldn't come. Four P.M. on a sunny afternoon.

That night Jake got rid of one hundred dollars of junk at the Paradise. He went up on the dance stand and requested a favorite number. He told the players where to pick up the junk; he was told where to pick up the money. That was the way it went. Nobody ever welched, nobody.

16

FRIDAY NIGHT Jake stopped running from Maxine; he knew what he was going to do. As always Maxine was looking good. She had on a fashionable, chic dress that gathered tightly at the waist and billowed out from her hips, a swinging circle of skirt framing her well-developed dancer's legs. Maxine was tall for a girl, but she wasn't thin. Her nickname, Slim, came from the litheness, the grace of body and limb that was always present in her movements. He

got out and opened the door for her. She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Good thing you did that before I started driving," Jake said.

"Why?" Maxine said as he got under the steering wheel.

"Would have raised my blood pressure so much I wouldn't have been able to control this thing," Jake said.

Maxine laughed a hollow laugh. Both of them were playing with each other, and both knew it.

After the movie they went across the street to the Paradise. The pretense that everything's the same, the warding off of the inevitable with small talk.

"Isn't Gregory Peck the sweetest hunk of man? He really sends me."

"For some strange reason he don't move me, but that Jones girl, whoof. Never seen such a terrible cutta in all my life. Did you see how she was busting out of those overalls —"

"Jake." She hit him playfully.

"She looks almost as good as you —" The guilty pause.

"You're a heel."

"And —"

"I like you," she said. They sat at the bar sipping scotch and water. Off in the back the band blew loud and fast on the raised stage. Fatigued musicians exhibited their wares.

"I like you more than like you," she admitted.

He told Maxine good night at her door. He got rid of \$100 worth of junk. He got his own kicks on the hard, red glare.

SATURDAY NIGHT the Paradise. Jake, Maxine, Scar, Kenny, Spider, and Evelyn. A big name band and a crowded club. The sweltering air of people. Revolving lights swinging from the ceiling, splashing the club with waves of red, yellow and deep blue. Now purple, now a fuchsia undertone. The lights give the club the type of fuzzy atmosphere that the world appears to have after you open your eyes from unrestful sleep. It leads you into intoxication without the help of alcohol. The crowd watches in noisy anticipation. The crowd is in the mood—the band gives them what they are looking for. The sexy wail of the sax screams triumphant notes above the boisterous audience. Trumpets brace the voice of the sax, riff loud and clear over the dissonant wail. Brassy, ragged runs sail smoothly into quiet undertones. The drums and bass accentuate the rhythm. The crowd is with the band, sways with the music, makes the air static with gyrating fingers and pounding hands.

“Blow that thing.”

They dance, a whirling parody of jitterbugging, apple-jack, the bop—“Baby, you know how to hucklebuck?” Champagne bubbles, the warm glow of scotch manifests a new world. Weird, crazy sounds of bop, the frantic beat of jazz, the good ole lowdown blues.

... “*Some like to do it in the Winter!*”

... “Yeh.”

... “*Some like it in the Spring—*”

... “That’s me!”

... “*But, they call me daddy rolling stone—oh, my—when it’s pouring down ra-ii-nnn-nn—*”

Maxine loved to dance, but Jake was not in the dancing mood yet. That would come later, when the alcohol had

pushed him into an air of indifference. Spider beamed at the good fortune of getting Evelyn to go out. Kenny kept her eyes on Scar.

Champagne bubbled on their table, scotch glowed. They were successful businessmen. They drank only the best. Drinks, jokes —

The floor shows came and went. Shake dancers, chorus girls, vulgar, slapstick comedy, exhibitions of prowess from members of the band. That was the way the night went, and somewhere during that dizzy flow of activity Jake transacted business.

“Look,” Jake said, his head reeling to the buzz of alcohol. “Can you do this?” He started clapping his hands to the bongo beat. He brought his hands together once on a beat, then two times to a beat, then three, then he missed the beat altogether his hands fanning rapidly by each other without touching. He held up a certain number of fingers indicating how many times to clap on a beat; he made a zero with his thumb and index finger when they weren’t supposed to clap at all. Then he made it more complicated by missing a certain number of beats instead of simply clapping one beat and missing the next. The fingers on his other hand indicated which beat to clap on. Heads turned from the direction of the band to focus on their rocking table. A few people joined in, the rhythm became jumbled as the crowd tried to catch the beat. The whole place started rocking, the rhythm carrying up to the band members who joined in clapping their hands with the crowd. They had a rocking good time to the tricky rhythm of the handclaps. The band got carried away and gave an impromptu floor show. They jammed for twenty minutes, hot wild notes of screaming dissonance, slow, sweet, tricky counterpoint following a basic pattern of rhythm and melody. The band

loved itself. The crowd loved the band. They got what they had come to see — the night wore on, the band screamed the night away.

18

FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, the sun throwing a feeble ray into the blacked-out sky. The milkman and his bottles, the cabbie on his last early morning hustle, the ragman driving his lonely, bony old horse and wagon down the alleyways, punching at the refuse spilling from the overstuffed ash-pits. The swing shifter going home, the early morning crew on the way to work. A few slow-moving buses, the streetcar reeling on its early morning route. After hours cubby holes give up their load; the policeman, shivering in the early morning mist, curses silently, walks his deserted beat. The twenty-four hour restaurant, where the waitress sleeps, her scarred shoes listing on the floor, her run-filled stockings pulled under her as she curls in the booth. The old man drinking coffee at the counter, while the jukebox starves for nickels. The paperboy wiping the drizzle from his nose with the back of his hand, the wheels of his bicycle singing on the pavement wet with dew. The dull thump as the paper hits its mark on the lawn or porch in the still air. The light in the kitchen, the strong aroma of percolating coffee. The first yawn and the stifled impulse to fall back in bed. Somewhere strong and shrill, in a back-yard pen, a rooster crows. Five o'clock in the morning, a new day.

"I had a good time," Maxine said. "Come on in."

Jake went in; the protest died in his throat. In the dark

and not wanting to be there, and wanting to be there all at the same time, and unable to stop it. The rustling whisper of garments, intertwining limbs, and the betraying squeak of the bed, and giving up at last and being lost and tossed about on love-splattered timelessness, on a rocket ship, on a trip to the moon.

19

"WHAT'S YOUR MOTHER going to say when you come in this late at night?" Scar asked Kenny. "Or should I say early in the morning?"

"How late is it?" Kenny wanted to know.

"Quarter to six."

"I thought it was just a little after four."

"It was when we left the club. We stayed at Bill's a long time," Scar said.

"He has some good barbecue."

"We've been talking out here almost an hour," Scar said.

"That was some of the best barbecue I ever had in my life."

"I should have brought you home a lot sooner," Scar said.

"I had the best time I ever had in my life," Kenny said.

"Kenny."

But Kenny was feeling the effects of the champagne and intent on following her own line of conversation. "You haven't even kissed me," she said.

He kissed her. "Oh, I wish we could go somewhere," she said.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow I might not feel like this."

"You will. Don't you think you better go inside?"

"Mama will kill me," Kenny suddenly realized.

"It's not that serious."

"You don't know Mama. Let's try the back door," Kenny said. "Maybe I can sneak in that way."

They went around the back, trying not to make any noise in the trash-laden gangway, dank and peppery with urine. "Mama works hard for us kids. She says we better not give her no trouble. She says she ain't going to put up with it, and she won't. I know Mama."

"How many of you is there?" Scar said.

"Ten."

"Ten!"

"Shush, you'll wake up Mama. It's just four of us here. The rest are married, or in the Army. Two of my brothers got killed in World War Two."

"Tough."

"The insurance money helped a lot. Sometimes my brothers and sisters send money home. Everybody but Arthur. Mama put him out. We ain't heard from him since," Kenny said.

"Think you can make it in all right?" Scar said, finding the back door unlocked.

"If I don't, you'll hear me holler. You take off and run like hell," Kenny giggled. "Good night —" He cut her off with a kiss. She waved at him, tiptoeing up the steps with her shoes in her hand.

Man, you're hell, Scar told himself. Who's the babe you can't make? They don't exist. Satisfaction wouldn't come. It had gotten so that now a guy couldn't even joke about it. Who's the babe you can't make? They don't exist. Too bad no one ever told that to Maxine.

Afterwards Jake could never get it straight in his mind how he finally broke with Maxine. He couldn't actually say that he told her, or that she realized it was over and saved him the trouble. It did seem to him she did most of the talking. He remembered she took it good-naturedly. She was cool, she didn't seem particularly bothered. Good ole Slim, she was dependable. She was realistic about the whole thing. Nothing lasted. Hell, everybody knew that. He was glad Slim took it the way she had. He liked her for that.

Over at Armenta's, when she opened the door and looked questioningly at him standing there, he found himself unable to say anything. He must have stood there a few minutes without moving before realizing she had invited him in. In the front room he sat on the sofa still not saying anything. Armenta asked him if he wanted to hear some records. He nodded. Armenta had nothing to say. Jake felt foolish. In those moments he actually hated Armenta, because he thought she was ridiculing him and silently laughing at his uneasiness. So they sat listening to the records in silence. Finally, Jake decided to hell with it. He wasn't going to let no babe get away with treating him like dirt. He picked up his hat, stood up stiffly and said he would see her later.

"I don't want to see you," Armenta said. She followed him to the door.

Jake was bewildered, but he wasn't going to let her know it. He wasn't going to do anything else to give her a chance to laugh at, but on the threshold of the door, instead of walking coolly out without looking back, he found himself in the ridiculous position of hesitating. He would have felt a masochistic delight if she had shoved the door against his back and pushed him off the threshold. Why should he be acting so silly around this broad anyway? She didn't

care nothing about him. He stepped onto the porch still hesitating. When the door did not slam shut, he turned around to see her standing at the door looking at him. He would have said her face held no expression because he could not think of any expression to describe what he saw there. "Good night," he said.

"Good night."

"I just dropped by — " He paused. "I just wanted to tell you me and Maxine broke up."

Armenta said nothing, but Jake was sure she was silently laughing again. He felt like watching his shoes drag down the steps looking through hunched shoulders. "I guess I had you tagged wrong, kid," he said indifferently. "Never let it be said Jake Adams ever insisted on coming some place where he wasn't wanted. Later." He turned swiftly and walked down the steps with his shoulders squared. He had to get away from there; he had made enough of a fool of himself already.

What was it Armenta felt watching Jake going down the steps? Whatever it was, it wasn't pity. No one could ever pity Jake, she thought. He seemed like a little boy, almost. Armenta had never seen Jake like that before. She could never imagine Jake as a little boy. As conceited, cold, even brutal at times, she could imagine him. But she had always interpreted this as a defense of his to prove how tough he was, to hide the person he was underneath. The constant display of arrogance and indifference in Jake had always fascinated her, but he tried so hard to show everyone he was a man, especially since he had started getting money and dressing nice (he had been so shabby in grade school), that he was childish about it at times. But she had never thought of Jake before as a little boy, not even in grade school. She could not understand how that could be, because she had always, ever

since she first met Jake, wanted to mother him and make him act nice. He was so bad, he was the baddest thing in the world. "Jake." He turned at the bottom of the steps. "I don't mind you dropping by when you're in the neighborhood. If you want to," she added coquettishly.

Jake turned back around, walked out into the street and unlocked his car door. He drove away without looking back.

"That babe don't jive," he told Scar at Booker's.

"How you figure?"

"She's playing with me."

"Or trying to keep you from playing with her."

"You know me."

"And so does she."

"She don't have eyes for me," Jake said.

"She's got eyes."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeh, and I mean what I know. That babe goes for you, and you're goofed behind her. So quit trying to hide it from her and you'll get along fine."

"Up yours," Jake said.

"She's yours."

Monk came by. He had the same deal to offer. The night wore away rubbing against the stubborn light of dawn.

20

MAY CAME, frustrated flowers silently bombarded their way up through the earth. Green vegetation returned to the threadbare countryside. On the trees, green skin stretched itself around bony limbs. The faithful starlings now were

joined again by the wanderlust robin, the saucy bluejay, the scarlet cardinal. Their colors dazzled in the sunlight. The Mad Platter show exhibited the new turnover of records to the teen-age listeners. There was a thing called "East of Suez" by Charlie Ventura. The Chicken Shack had an unknown, George Shearing, occupying space on the jukebox. His "East of the Sun," "Continental," "September in the Rain," established him a following among the guys in the know. The kids played hide-and-go-seek when night approached. At night army blankets crowded the park. The winos switched from muscatel to mulberry. The Barracudas got bolder. Emma Culpard, the thirteen-year-old girl who lived down the street from Jake, bore evidence of conception. Gussy, her little brother, was constantly reminded of this by the snickering street. Wino Jepe went to jail on a morals charge. Pop Garveli wore his straw hat. Spider, Scar, and Jake had another good night at Zodie's. A rookie policeman was reassigned to the county after trying to hang a charge of narcotics possession on some name performers at the Paradise. Spring was back in all its glory.

Over on Bell Avenue, Scar and Kenny sat on the wooden steps of the front porch. People were crowding out of the tenements all along the block, boys and girls strolling along the streets and gangways. The tamale man, with his steam wagon loaded with pigs' knuckles, sausages, pigs' feet, and tamales, held fast to his station on the corner. His apron was crusty with mustard. Bubbles of perspiration popped from his face. His tired feet ached in worn-out shoes. The shopworn smile with the crooked, remnant teeth leered hopefully in the night. The steam whistle shrilled erratically, wooing the roustabouts to the tamale man's wares. Boys gathered around the lamppost on the corner, discussing girls they had known, girls real and imaginary. Since the girls were dis-

cussed so vividly and exactly, every account was taken as factual. The coalshed was a rendezvous for teen-age love; in the alleys they gambled. Wine and pod stimulated their blood. Soon they would roam around looking for trouble and if unable to find it would fight among themselves.

"Mama will be coming home soon," Kenny told Scar.

"She cuts some mean hours."

"Only eight, except when the hotel has a late party or something, then she has to stay late. You know dishwashers have to stay later than anyone else."

"Yeh, and you always have to be dishwashers."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," Scar said. "You know, Kenny, it's hard to get a good job, 'specially if you don't have a good education."

"Well, Mama never went past the fifth grade, but she's smart. She's self-educated. She's awful smart when it comes to life, though she don't know much about books, and stuff like that."

"Yeh," Scar said, knowing it was hopeless to get Kenny to see what he was talking about. "What are you going to do after graduation?"

"I don't know," Kenny said. "Civil Service or something, I guess."

"How you figure?"

"Lots of colored girls work for the government. Take Max —"

"Maxine's smart. She graduated with a 91.8 average in high school," Scar said. "Right behind me."

"So what?"

"You have to pass a test to get those jobs," Scar said.

"They're good jobs," Kenny said.

"A lot of people think so."

"I suppose you think you can do better?"

"I might one of these days."

"You think you're so smart, Alonzo Carroway."

"I don't think you're smart enough to get a job in Civil Service."

"Oh no? Well, just what do you think I'm smart enough to do?"

"Wash dishes in somebody's kitchen."

Kenny looked at Scar, that puzzled expression crossed her face again.

"Don't let me get you down, kid," Scar said.

"That's all you ever want to do," Kenny said. "Take me somewhere and get me down."

Scar was surprised. He had never suspected Kenny of being capable of coming up with a comment like that.

"Here comes Mama," Kenny said.

Mrs. Waston came up the steps in the tired shuffle of people who work for long stretches of time standing on their feet. Streaks of gray criss-crossed her woolly hair. She was a large and muscular woman, stretched out of shape by too many tiring hours of hard work, and the pull of too many children conceived too fast. Her stockings were a highway of runs. *How many husbands have you had, Mrs. Waston? How many did you marry?*

"Hi kids," Mrs. Waston said. "I sure is tired. Lord knows I is." She rubbed a plump hand across her aching back. "Never seen folks could make such a mess as them high-polluting white folks. Don't you kids stay out here all night," she said going into the house. "Don't you go sitting out there hugging and kissing," she said laughing. "If ya'll got to get all hot and bothered, come on inside where ain't nobody goin' pay you no mind."

MOST NIGHTS Jake spent over at Armenta's. Jake felt that Mr. Arnez did not like him and told Armenta about it. Armenta told Jake not to worry about it. Armenta never allowed herself to look realistically at her father's attitude concerning her and Jake. She was afraid to. Such was not the case with Mrs. Arnez. She always took her husband quite seriously. Her husband was a man who held an attitude on everything and his attitudes seldom changed. Mrs. Arnez had learned, through long experience, the only way she could change his attitude was to belittle or doubt the seriousness of whatever her husband was set against.

The night Jake took Armenta to the Drive-In, Mr. Arnez told his wife he didn't like it.

"I think he's a nice boy," Mrs. Arnez said.

"That eighteen-year-old mystery man? She won't tell me a thing about him. Acts all hurt when I mention a simple question like who his folks are, where he works, and things like that."

"She doesn't want you to pry," Mrs. Arnez said.

"Pry! A man has a right to know who his daughter is spending her time with, and I tell you right now, there's something wrong with that boy."

"Oh, Henry, you can get so upset over nothing."

"That girl always did have poor taste when it came to boys."

"My parents said the same thing about me."

"Take that Rudolph fella. A knuckle-headed athlete. Now what did she see in him?"

"I heard he was a pretty smart boy, Henry. He's going to college."

"On an athletic scholarship."

"So?"

"Edna, you can make light of me all you want, but I tell you this, Armenta better never get serious with that Jake guy, not until I know a whole lot more about him than I do now. You know what they say about people with something to hide."

"Who's hiding anything?"

"It's a cinch they aren't telling me anything," Mr. Arnez said.

"Henry, you're a fright. Why don't you go to bed? You know you have to be at church early in the morning."

"You don't seem to be worrying about your daughter going to church early in the morning."

"She doesn't have to go with us. She can go to eleven o'clock mass."

"What time is it now?"

"Ten after eleven."

"Kind of late for a seventeen-year-old to be out."

"The Drive-In doesn't let out until late. Besides, they might want to get a malted milk or something after the show. Now go to bed, Henry, you won't feel like getting up in the morning and you know we have to go to mass."

Henry Arnez raved on, but Mrs. Arnez was not irritated. She had been listening to her husband talking about the proper way to bring up their daughters for the last twenty-seven years.

22

OUT IN A LANE in the woody countryside, Jake and Armenta watched the moon through the tangled treetops.

"It's still the same old story," Jake said, thinking out loud.

"What?" Armenta wanted to know.

"Just thinking of a song, remember the movie *Casablanca*?"

"Sure, Tony Martin."

"I preferred Humphrey Bogart."

"You would. What's the matter?" Armenta said, noticing Jake's uneasiness.

"Nothing."

"You look strange."

"Do I?"

"I said you did."

"Well, I ain't funny," Jake said.

"You aren't?" She was looking him straight in the eye. He couldn't tell whether it was a challenge or mockery smiling under the long silky lashes. His hands became bold. She looked at him with the look a mother reserves for the favorite naughty boy. The look infuriated him and he kissed her more in anger than anything else. She trembled against him and the roof of his mouth was on fire again. The eyes, that he had sworn were busy mocking him, were tightly closed when he pushed her down on the front seat of the car. She murmured "Stop," weakly, but her legs responded to the command of his body. Then her rapid breathing gave way to a moan.

Afterwards she looked at him with that look in her eyes. "Let me up, Jake," she said matter-of-factly. She acted as if she was going to sit over in the corner of the car away from him, but he grabbed her and held her close with her head resting on his chest under his chin.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said awkwardly.

She smiled weakly. He could feel the blush burn her body. "I did it once before," she said.

"Why?"

"Out of curiosity."

"Curiosity get the better of you now?"

"None of your business." She slapped him playfully. "What are you thinking?" she said uneasily.

"I'm crazy about you," Jake said. "I've never known anybody like you before. I didn't know it was possible for anybody to move me like you do."

"You ever try Duz?" Armenta said. "Duz does everything."

"Armenta." He kissed that look from her eyes.

"You don't have to lay it on so thick," she said. "You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"Why in the hell you go out with me if you don't like me?" Jake said.

"Who said anything like that?" Armenta said surprised.

"Well, you act like it. Everything I say, you make something funny out of it."

"You think I — I would — if I didn't like you?"

"Well, you did," Jake said angrily.

"Why you — you —" She looked warm enough to blow smoke signals. They suddenly burst out laughing.

"Why do we always fight?" Jake said pulling her close to him again.

"You're so bad," Armenta said. "You're the most impossible thing in the world. Do you really like me?" she said glancing at him through the corner of her eyes.

"From your navel to your knees," Jake said. He grabbed her wrists before she could slap him and kissed her until she stopped struggling.

"Oh, you," she said.

"And your legs, and your ankles, and your feet, and your toes, and your breasts, and your arms, and your shoulders, and your neck, and your chin, and your mouth, and your stuck-up nose, and your eyes, and your hair, and you and you and you," Jake whispered in her ear.

"Jake Adams, you're so silly," she said smiling. "What time is it?"

"Five after twelve."

"Take me home. You know I promised Mother to be home by twelve," she managed to blurt out while they tussled and fondled each other.

23

ONE WEEK LATER, at the Paradise where he had gone on business matters, Jake ran into Maxine sitting at the bar. She was between two men. It was obvious what they were trying to do. Jake recognized one of the guys. His name was Benbow. He had a reputation as a lady killer. The men were buying Maxine scotch on rocks. Maxine was trying to keep that sexy look in her eyes, but the whisky kept pulling them out of focus. She wore a black sophisticated dress that hugged a grown-up frame. Light, sophisticated laughter spilled from lips pulled tense by a mocking smile. Whisky was slowly stripping away sophistication. Jake walked over to the bar and touched Maxine on the arm. "Hi, Slim, what you trying to prove?"

"Jake! Hello, heel," she said.

"Who's your friend?" the guy on the right wanted to know.

"This is Jake," Maxine said in a confidential tone. "Jake, this —" she paused. "What did you say your name was?" Maxine giggled to cover her embarrassment.

"Eddie."

"That's right, Eddie." She tapped Eddie lightly on the shoulder, and turned back to Jake. "Benbow, this is —"

"I know him," Benbow said.

"Oh!" Maxine looked amused.

"How you been, Jake?" Benbow said.

"Everything's crazy," Jake said.

"I've been having a wonderful time," Maxine told Jake. "There must be a million bars in this town. They've got more bars in this town than I thought they had in the whole world." She gulped down her drink. "Whoops," she said straightening out her legs and wiggling her toes through her open-toed shoes. She giggled again. Somehow she could not stop giggling. "Doesn't even burn going down. That's funny, isn't it? Why doesn't it burn going down any more, Jake? Remember how you used to always tease me about making faces when I drank? I don't any more. Watch, I'll show you. Charlie, bring me another drink. Bring Jake one too. Benbow and Eddie don't mind, do you?" she said, looking at them.

Benbow and Eddie nodded.

"I don't want one, and you don't need one," Jake said.

"What's the matter, heel?" Maxine said. "You never used to try to keep me from drinking."

"I never used to have to."

"Tsk, tsks," Maxine said. "Maxine, you're a very naughty girl. The heel won't like you if you drink. Why do I always have to do what you want to do? Why can't I ever do what I want to do?" Maxine said. She was crying and she knew she mustn't cry, not ever, especially in front of Jake.

"Say, is this cat bothering you?" Eddie said.

"Be cool," Jake said quietly.

"I'll —"

"Try it," Jake said matter-of-factly.

"Let's everybody be friends," Maxine said smiling, dabbing at her eyes with an inadequate feminine handkerchief.

"Come on, Slim," Jake said. "I'm taking you home." He

lifted her off the stool by the shoulders. He was disgusted. He thought Maxine knew better.

Eddie started to get up, but Benbow restrained him by placing a slim hand on his shoulder. "Who in hell does that guy think he is?" Eddie said.

"Forget it," Benbow said, raising a glass of scotch to his lips and sipping the drink calmly.

"But I spent four bucks on that broad!"

Benbow looked at Eddie disgustedly. He adjusted his blond straw hat with the brown band to the proper angle over his slender face. "That's the way it goes," Benbow said. He wound the stem of his expensive Benrus Citation and rubbed the heavy gold band of the watch on his dark, light-weight suitcoat sleeve. He looked at himself critically in the mirror over the bar, and adjusted the dark brown tie. He noticed his fingernails were a little bit shabby. He reminded himself to stop by the manicurist tomorrow.

Outside, Maxine was giggling again. "Benbow invited me to a party in his rathskeller. He's got a new Cadillac," she said. "Better than your ole Dynaflo."

"Man, dig the switch on the bitch," a guy said to a fellow lounge on the corner.

"You can do better than that, Slim," Jake said, irritated by the way Maxine was weaving along in her highheel shoes.

"Why don't you leave if you don't like the way I'm walking?"

"If I wasn't a fool, I would."

Maxine looked at Jake. "I don't think you're a fool," she said softly. She pressed his arm tightly with her hand.

He intended to leave Maxine at her door, but he didn't. Maxine talked in circles like an intoxicated person, and yet Jake knew she wasn't drunk. "Stay with me, just for a little while," she told Jake. She made him sit down on the bed and

cuddled in his lap with her face against his shoulders. She told him a lot of things. She told him she didn't want to be silly, and act like a little girl. She told him her father was dead and she had no one to turn to. She said she was afraid and ashamed of being scared of life, that she had tried to learn to be like he told her, but she just wasn't as tough as he was. "I still like you, Jake," she admitted in a shaky voice. "Even though — everything is through between us."

Why had she looked at him then? Why couldn't she keep her face against his shoulder and not look at him like that? He thought he felt every muscle in her body vibrate as she breathed. She squirmed in his lap, pressing her body against him, while the tears began to sneak from the corners of her eyes. She held him tighter, trying to control herself. Her hands massaged his shoulders in a slow, circular motion. It was like lighting a match to a gas-filled oven. He didn't even feel her teeth on his neck. She was the eager one, she gave him no time to prepare himself. His shoulders became smeared with her tears.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Slim," Jake said.

She was incapable of speech. Her nails left their mark on his shoulder. In the apartment across the hall the radio blared through the thin walls of the apartment house . . . *I wonder where our love has gone* . . . the rich, baritone voice of Arthur Prysock crooned.

24

THE HIGH SCHOOL auditorium was crowded with relatives of the graduating students. Jake and Scar sat in the upper bal-

cony four rows from the back. From where they were the stage appeared to be a mass of maroon robes with white stoles and shades of brown blotches where heads were supposed to be. The school band played movements from the *New World Symphony*. The choir sang spirituals, the surprisingly mature deep bass voices forming a colorful background for the high flying voices of the spirited sopranos. The bald head of the principal caught the beams from the light and cast a glittering reflection into the audience as his head bobbed up and down in rhythm to the trite speech he made every January and every June. The bald head of the man seemed to accentuate his personality. He had bowed and scraped for years and probably rubbed all his hair off doing so. His life was a direct opposite of the inspired message he delivered to the students. His weak voice attested to the fact that that sort of words had no business emerging from the lips of that sort of man. The audience grinned at the principal. The grin could mean anything.

Jake, who had been concentrating on trying to find Armenta among the robes, finally gave it up as hopeless. Scar had a more effective way of getting around listening to what the principal was saying. He went to sleep. Finally, the students strolled down the stage one at a time to get their diplomas. The audience was asked not to clap as each pupil received his diploma. The request was ignored. The popularity and number of relatives present for each pupil was indicated by the handclaps. Consequently, it was no surprise to Jake or Scar that Armenta received very many and Kenny few.

The audience dispersed to meet the graduates in the second-floor hallway. "We'll see you at the car," Scar told Jake and led Kenny away from the boisterous relatives swarming around the students. No one was present to greet Kenny and

Scar did not want to give her a chance to think about it. He remembered how lonely Maxine had looked last year.

Mr. Arnez was almost cordial to Jake when he finally led Armenta away from congratulating relatives.

"I hope they don't stay out too late," Mr. Arnez told his wife.

"They won't," Mrs. Arnez said.

"Well, graduation takes care of that problem. When we send Armenta off to college, we won't have to worry about that bird following her up there. Once she's up there, with the right kind of people, she'll soon forget about him," Mr. Arnez said with satisfaction.

25

ON THE NIGHT of the high school prom Kenny and Armenta wore off-the-shoulder evening gowns — Kenny's a smart imitation of the high-priced model, Armenta's the real thing.

Jake and Scar stood correct and uncomfortable in tuxedo shirts, the lightweight summer jacket and tux pants, the highly polished black leather shoes.

Kenny was the talk of the prom. She had a white orchid pinned above her breast on her blue gown. "Baby, are you doing that to the dress, or is the dress doing that to you, or are you doing it to each other?" Scar said.

"Oh shut up," Kenny said.

"You having a good time?"

"That's a silly question," Kenny said. Her eyes were alive with excitement.

"People should have a good time some of the time," Scar said.

"Oh, Alonzo," Kenny said, caressing his neck with her fingers. "You're so crazy."

"You're a good kid," Scar said. "I hope you'll be happy some day."

"I'm happy now."

"Now is such a short time," Scar said. They danced to the music of Percy White, a local band.

"Scar double-crossed me," Jake told Armenta as they sat over in the corner watching Scar and Kenny dance.

Armenta smiled. "How?" she said.

"That white orchid. We agreed to get orchids, but Jim, he must have paid a fortune for that white thing."

"This beat-up ole purple thing is good enough for me," Armenta said.

"They don't grow orchids good enough for you."

Armenta squeezed Jake's hand. She smiled. It was a sad smile.

"What's wrong?" Jake said.

"Oh nothing," Armenta said. She squeezed his hand again.

"Come on, give," Jake said. "Don't this setup bugg you?"

"That's just it, it does. I only wish — "

"I thought you outgrew being bashful?"

"I was just thinking about Mary," Armenta said.

"Mary?"

"Uh-huh, Mary Ballard. She didn't graduate," Armenta said puzzled.

"There's always somebody who don't make it," Jake said.

"But she was third-ranking student," Armenta said, shaking her head. "We were good friends," Armenta said. "We were supposed to go to college together."

Out on the dance floor Kenny pushed Scar away from her. "Don't hold me so close," she said. "You'll mash the orchid."

"If I had known that damn thing was going to keep me

away from you, I would never have bought it," Scar said.

"You shouldn't have," Kenny said smiling through misty eyes.

Scar shrugged. Unlike Jake, he was always embarrassed when someone thanked him for doing something and so he shrugged it off as if it were nothing. He saw Pearl dance by him and told her he would be over after the number was over. On the next dance he left Kenny with Armenta and Jake and danced with Pearl. Scar felt like a sponge. He felt he had to absorb every minute with all of his friends here. He wondered if they realized this would be the last time many of them ever saw each other?

"She's still carrying the torch for you, Curt is, I mean," Pearl whispered in Scar's ear.

"They burn out," Scar said.

Scar saw some of his old teammates over in a corner and joined them after leading Pearl from the floor.

"We sure missed you last year," Mike said.

"You did O.K.," Scar said.

"Yeh, but we didn't have nobody could pull 'em out of the fire at the last minute like you used to."

"Well, I never saw anything like that Flakes-Hill combination," Scar said. "Remember that pass he threw in the last minute of the Riddick game? I don't see how he even managed to get the ball away, the way they were riding him down, much less throw that thing so far. That ball must have gone fifty yards, and did you see how Hill came out of nowhere to take it? With one hand too. How he ever got his hands on that ball I'll never know."

"He catches all of 'em with one hand," Flakes said.

"Only the hard ones," Hill said.

Armenta sat over in the corner sipping punch, watching Jake and Kenny dance. Rudolph would have tried to dance every dance with her. Rudolph was so dependable. Rudolph

was dull. Jake had better remember who's his ole lady, Armenta thought.

Burnell came over and asked Armenta to dance. They glided over the floor. Burnell could really dance. "How you and Jake making it?" Burnell wanted to know.

"We're living."

"If I had an ole lady as fine as you, I sure wouldn't be dancing with no one else," Burnell said.

"What's so bad-looking about Beatrice? She's got all the boys in school after her."

"She ain't as fine as you."

"You've sure got a line."

"I'm just talking," Burnell said.

"I know it. I know you're goofed behind Beatrice."

"I wish I was sure how she was about me."

"Are you kidding?"

"We're getting married," Burnell said uncertainly.

"Wonderful," Armenta said meaning it. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I don't know how it's going to work out, I'm going into the Air Force."

"It'll work out," Armenta said. "'Cause you want it to."

"I wish I was as sure about it as you are," Burnell said.

After the dance Armenta told Jake about Burnell and Beatrice.

"Proves my theory that women are dangerous," Jake said.

"He's going into the Air Force," Armenta said.

"Tough," Jake said raising an eyebrow.

"What's wrong with that?"

"They always told me absence makes the heart grow fonder — of somebody else," Jake added.

"Jake," Armenta said. "Don't you believe a girl can be true?"

"Women or men either," Jake said shaking his head.

"Jake," Armenta said pouting.

"I only believe one thing."

"What?"

"People will fugg up."

"You believe I would do you like that?" Disbelief lowered Armenta's voice below its normal deep range.

"I wish I could believe otherwise."

"Well, I wouldn't."

"I hope I never have to find out."

"I wouldn't," Armenta said.

"It's easy to say."

Over in the rest room the girls stood around and talked.

"Might have known Armenta Arnez come in trying to show off," one of the girls said.

"Yeh and Kenny's getting just like her since they started running together."

"Who ever heard of anybody wearing a white orchid to a high school prom?"

"Honey, you're just jealous 'cause your ole man didn't get you one."

"Well, those look like plain ole dollar-and-a-half carnations you're wearing, baby."

"Ain't it the truth. Just like yours, honey, and I sure wish William would have brought me one of those fragile little expensive white things."

"Scar always has been a show-off anyway. You have to expect things like that from him."

"You're probably stuck on Scar yourself. What you trying to prove anyway?"

"I ain't trying to prove nothing. I just wish William was a show-off like Scar."

"Wonder what he sees in ole black Kenny."

"Calm down, you high yellow bitch," Pearl said. "Kenny's

one of the cutest chicks ever went to this school, and she's got a fine shape too, honey, and she don't have to go downtown and buy falsies like some people I know."

"Are you insinuating —"

"I ain't insinuating, I'm signifying. You can tell by the feel, mine are real."

The air grew tense. "Oh, Kenny's O.K.," a girl said, "but that Armenta —"

"What about her?" Curt said.

"I don't see what Jake sees in her."

"You ever compare legs?" Curt said.

"Or chests?" Pearl added.

"Well, they won't be together long."

"Naw, Jake don't spend too much time with no one girl," Geneva said.

"He sure is a fine-looking dark boy."

"I've seen 'em darker."

"I've seen 'em lighter."

"He's sure got some fine clothes."

"An' money."

"An' a Dynaflo —"

Jake was dancing with some other girl again. Armenta sat in the corner talking to Gertrude, a skinny, freckled-faced girl who graduated at the head of the class. "Girl, I don't like to say this. I know I shouldn't —"

"Shouldn't what?" Armenta said. Jake had better come on back here, she was thinking.

"Don't you know about Mary?"

"No."

"That was her baby they found in the toilet," Gertrude said. "That's why she didn't graduate."

"Mary!" Armenta said.

"It's true," Gertrude said.

"But, she was so nice."

"That just shows you, you never can tell about some people," Gertrude said.

"Huh?" Armenta said still shocked.

"Oh, nothing," Gertrude said. "It couldn't happen to me," she said, a pious expression on her face.

"No, I guess it couldn't," Armenta said. "Since you can't get a boy friend." Armenta was hurt. Mary had been one of her closest friends. She had ranked third in class, right behind Gertrude and Armenta. Armenta couldn't get over it. When Jake came back she was trying to hold in the tears.

"Mary was having a baby," she told Jake. "That's why she didn't graduate."

"Mary Ballard?"

"Yes. They found it . . . in, in the toilet stool." Armenta shuddered. "Remember, I told you about it."

"Those things happen," Jake said.

"But, she was so nice."

"To somebody."

"And so smart —"

"And so human," Jake said.

"Don't you ever feel sorry for anybody, Jake?" Armenta said, unable to believe she was hearing right.

"Not if I can help it."

Armenta looked at Jake. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. Jake was always shocking people. He had always been fascinating. Now Armenta wondered if most of that fascination hadn't always been the fascination of horror. She did not believe Jake could mean that. No human being could mean that. She squeezed his hand back. He held her very close when he danced with her.

. . . Hey little girl, the band played . . . I've got eyes for . . .

"I got a ship to Central State," Flakes was saying. "I'm going to be the toughest little quarterback ever hit the place."

"You're the only braggart I know that's as good as he says he is," Scar said.

"Then, he ain't a braggart. He's just stating the facts," William said.

"Where you going, Country?" Scar said.

"Xavier."

"That means you and Scott will be playing against each other when Xavier and Southern tangle."

"Yeh."

... *Hey little girl, I got eyes for you* ...

"Too bad all of you couldn't get ships to the same school," Scar said.

"Ain't it the truth."

... *Hey little girl, what you gonna do* ...

"You ought to come on down to Central with me," Flakes told Scar. "Nothing to keep you from going to school now."

"I might," Scar lied. "I'm going one of these days," he added almost believing it.

... *Hey little girl, ain't you mighty fine* ...

"Don't wait too late," Flakes said.

... *Hey little girl, ain't you mighty fine* ...

"I better go see 'bout my beast," Scar said, not wanting to talk about it any longer.

"Bettern we all."

Scar sat in the corner waiting for Kenny to come off the dance floor. Everything was gone now. The thrill of the evening had been dispersed by the hard facts of reality. He saw Jake and Armenta dancing cheek to cheek on the dance floor. He's sure got it bad, Scar thought. Man, I need a lift.

... *Hey little girl* ...

Scar hoped he could make it through the dance without getting sick, before his habit came down.

... Hey little girl, I'm in love with you ...

And so went the night, the bittersweet prom, the last gathering of the class.

... Hey little girl, I'm in love with you ...

The parting of the ways —

... I'll do anything baby, anything in the world for you ...

26

JULY WAS ALWAYS hot. This July was no exception. The bars and public establishments on Welch Street were air-conditioned, except places like Molly's and Booker's Billiard Parlor, where you had to wait until two o'clock in the morning for nature to cool things off. There were a lot of places like that. The pace of the street was torrid as the weather. People dressed for the weather; they did not slow down because of it. People shuffled over the street like flying cards under the erratic manipulations of a bungling dealer. Welch Street sweltered.

The guys hung around Booker's in ten-dollar panamas, T shirts, levi's and Stacey Adam shoes. The New York game was rapidly drawing to a close. Scar had dampered enthusiasm in the game. The guys in the know had double-teamed on Scar, telling each other the pills they held and setting each other up by ducking up or making each other balls, but Scar was still winning. The more pressure they put on him, the better he shot. When they were unsuccessful in hiding him behind some ball, so he couldn't hit the ball he was supposed

to shoot at, which happened too often to suit them, Scar ran the table. The guys got mad at each other. Scar knew what they were doing and was amused. Scar was also ten dollars ahead when Jake came in.

"What's happening, President?" Booker said, trying out the new expression that had sprung up among the teen-agers.

"It's 'What's happening, Pres,'" Scotty said.

"Pres, President. What's the dif?" Booker said.

"Hey, man," Jake said, speaking to all of them. "What's going?"

"Hear your ole lady's going to college," Booker told Jake.

"That's what they say."

"Man, ain't you worried 'bout them college cats cutting in? With all that book learning, psychology and all that, and you not there. Man, I'd be worried if I was you."

"You ain't me," Jake said.

"O.K., President, you cool," Booker said.

"Say man," Jake said to Scar. "Give the studs a break. Come on and dig Tree with me at Zodie's. Cage is in town and you know how they always jam when he comes in."

"They gonna curse each other out?"

"Don't they always?"

"That's some crazy happenings, man," Scar said, "but the boys might want to try and break even."

"Are you kidding?" Scotty said. "With you out of the game maybe some of us can make some bread."

Scar laughed. "Pure luck, man. Pure luck." Scar hung up his stick. The game went on.

Out on the street the night sounds. The baby cries, the kids chasing each other through the gangways. In the hallways the fellows and the girls. The shrill ringing burglar alarm at Judiheimer's pawn shop where the gaping hole in the window protested of trespassing.

In the Zodiac, Jake and Scar sat at the bar twisted around so they could see the bandstand where Tree and his group were playing. Cage had not arrived yet and the crowd was waiting expectantly for the magnificent entrance they knew he would make. "What's Spider doing? Haven't seen him lately," Jake said.

"He's sitting in with Evelyn all the time. I wouldn't be surprised if they got hitched."

"Jim," Jake said. "The stud's for real, ain't he?"

"Gotta be if he's going to tie a square knot."

"Well, they've been tight long enough."

"Yeh, Spider always did say he was going to hitch up when he was twenty-one."

"That was a crazy birthday party."

"Yeh," Scar laughed. "Spider killed me talking that stuff. He thought he was too old for birthday licks, but the studs whipped him anyway. That reminds me man, hear the Cootas are thinking about building a rep on the T's."

Jake shrugged. "Only fools commit suicide. Specs got too much sense for that. Anyway man, we ain't in any more."

"The guys say you never get out."

"Who cares what the guys say? Anyhow, I might not be around this town much longer."

"Naw?"

"Naw!"

The spotlight shining on the stage suddenly changed directions and swept through the customers to focus on the door. Tree squeaked like an elephant on the tenor sax that looked small in his gigantic hands. He doubled his huge six-six frame toward the door and belched a low groan from the sax.

"Pick up," Scar said.

Tree turned the sax toward the ceiling, rared back and blew a string of musical epigrams welcoming the return of

the successful home-town boy. Tree's husky frame vibrated like the sax, clear, sharp notes rang from the force of powerful lungs.

Small, smiling Cage stood in the door, his frail body wrapped around an alto sax almost as big as he was. Cage glittered with success. The gold tooth glittered from the side of his mouth when he grinned. The gold rings on his fingers glittered as he raised the shimmering golden saxophone up to his mouth. Cage answered Tree with the sharp, flippant tongue of the alto sax. The crowd roared, the session had begun.

Da-da-da-da-da-da, Tree blew. *Kill that mother fug —*
Sce-de-da. Sce-de-da. Cage answered. *Your mother, your mother.*

Applause thundered.

Da-de-da-de-sce-dop, Tree blew.

You're another one, the alto answered.

Trimmed your Fanny Brown.

Is that chick still in town? the alto inquired.

Tree blew hot, short notes daring Cage to come up on the bandstand where Tree could show him up.

Cage answered the challenge. He applejacked through the aisle leading up to the stand blowing wild insults as he went along. Tree answered, screaming loudly on the tenor.

Applause ricocheted.

"Man, those studs are crazy."

"They're the coolest," Scar agreed.

Sce, ba-de-ba-sce-, be-sce-ba. Better get yourself a white girl, Cage blew mounting the stand. *Sce-ba, de-de-sce, de-ba, sce-de. And leave these nigger women alone.*

Sce-ba-bop-ba-bop-ba-ba, sce-ba-ba-bop-ba-ba. How you gonna sound baby, how you gonna sound!

Blowing a pretty little white girl, is better than a saxophone.

Sce, da, ba, de, de, sce-d-da, de-de. He's funny that way, he's funny that way, Tree blew.

The crowd laughed. "What did he say?" a woman wanted to know. People looked at each other, swept along by the rhythm of the music but not understanding the meaning. People cajoled the guys in the know about what was happening. The guys in the know said Be cool, so they could hear what was going on. The squares went along with the guys in the know caught in the fervor of the music.

You can have your pretty ofay girl, with her pretty little golden curled head. I'll take a flat-tongued klinker top, 'cause she knows what to do in bed. Cage almost dropped his horn laughing.

Sce, da-d-be-bla-aa, Cage blew.

Sce-de-bop, sce-de-bop.

Tree and Cage got real nasty.

"When you going to quit it?" Scar asked Jake.

"Not until the session's over, man," Jake said.

"I mean the city, man."

"Hey, pick up on Tree," Jake said.

"I'm digging," Scar said. "You must have found a gold mine, man, to leave the corners with all that bread you're making."

"I'm going to hit on Monk for the same deal in J City," Jake said.

"You mean where Lincoln is?"

"Yeh."

"You mean you're going up there with Armenta, man?"

"If I can talk Monk into it."

Scar did not know what to say. Jake was goofed behind Armenta, he had to be, but Jim — to go to college just to — Maybe he was just jealous because he couldn't go. Still, how in hell did Jake figure Monk would let him do something

like that? "You scared somebody might make it to your ole lady if you're not around?"

"You and Booker think just alike," Jake said. "I just thought I might want to pick up on some college happenings, that's all. A little education can come in handy they tell me."

Scar let the subject drop. This was the first time he had ever known Jake to be a dreamer. Anybody with any sense at all knew Monk wasn't going to let Jake go to J City, not and keep working for him, he wasn't. Scar wondered what Maxine was doing.

Jake had started to tell Scar the real reason he wanted to go to J City, but Scar had guessed. In fact everybody had guessed. He was glad he had not told Scar. Man, how they would have laughed. They would laugh anyway. The hell with them, let them laugh. How was he going to talk Monk into it though? Man, there had to be some way, if he could just figure it out. He wasn't going to give up pushing, that was for sure, not for anything, not even for Armenta.

Tree blew an idea on the tenor, but before he could finish, Cage finished it for him. Tree called Cage a son-of-a-bitch. Cage blew an idea and Tree cut him off with one of his own.

Applause mingled with the music.

SPIDER CAME OUT of the Brook Brothers Tailor Shop down on Kinkell and Broadway. Brook Brothers was one of the most exclusive tailoring shops downtown. He carried his new suit in a box under his arm. His new gray Greenfield

suedes were not quite comfortable to his feet yet. Man, I'm really getting sharp, he told himself. He took the dice out of his pocket, kissed them and returned them to the pocket. He went across Broadway down to Third Street, turned left at the corner, walked down to the end of the block, and leaned on a paper stand.

"Paper, mister?"

"Never read the things."

"How you expect to keep up with what's going on in the world mister?" the news hawk said.

"I know what's going on in my world." It was five o'clock. Evelyn should be coming along any minute, Spider thought.

Employees filed out of Lane Bryant's like swiftly scurrying ants. Spider watched five minutes before seeing Evelyn. She saw him and started across the street against the traffic sign and the traffic cop angrily waved her back to the sidewalk. "We got jay-walker laws in this city," he told her, finally motioning her to cross the street.

"Sorry," Evelyn said. "I don't know what I was thinking about."

Evelyn smiled and linked her arm in Spider's.

"Work hard?"

"Not too hard."

"You ask the people about Kenny?"

"Uh-huh. I've been asking for weeks. I know she'd like to get away from the sweaty ole laundry, but they're all filled up right now."

"Let's go somewhere and peck."

"Mother's looking for me to eat at home," Evelyn said.

"Then sip on a milkshake or something while I peck," Spider said. "I don't like the food at home."

"Oh, Bert," Evelyn said exasperated as he guided her into a Walgreen Drugstore. "I'm going to be late getting home," she said as they sat in a booth waiting to be served.

"We'll catch a taxi," Spider said.

"I wish you wouldn't throw so much money away."

"It costs money to live," Spider said defensively.

"I'll ruin my appetite," Evelyn said, sipping on a milkshake while Spider ate steak, french, and a lettuce and tomato salad. "How much does that cost?"

"Dollar and sixty-five."

"You sure are extravagant."

"You have to pay for good things," Spider said.

"If you've got that much money, you should let me save twenty a week instead of just ten."

"Are we going to get into that again?"

"If I can save twenty on my check, I don't see why you can't," Evelyn said.

"You don't have any expenses at home."

"Bert, you could still do it if you wanted to."

"Jim, you're going to make a penny-pinching wife," Spider said. "When are we getting hitched anyway?"

"When you're ready for it."

"I'm ready now."

"No, you're not."

"I'm ready as I'm ever going to be," Spider insisted.

"Soon as we get enough money —"

"Aw, come off it baby, will ya?"

"We can't start on a shoestring."

"Who's lacing shoes?"

"If you would let me put away more money —"

"Man, oh man, my baby's got a one-track mind. I give up," he said.

"You going to —"

"Yeh. The way you keep harping about bread, you make me think you're going to skip town with it or something," Spider said grinning.

"Bert!" Evelyn said, not thinking it was funny.

"Man, that was good," Spider finally said. "I don't see why you worry about bread all the time. It's easy to get if you know what tree it grows on."

"You've got to stop gambling too; I can't marry a gambler."

"Oh, hell. O.K.," Spider said. "I'll look for a regular job tomorrow." What the hell, he could get a part-time hustle somewhere, tell her he had a regular job and she would never know the dif. Only a crazy man would cut long hours when he could bounce some bones across the table and know he was going to come out on top. "Hey, I want to show you my new front," Spider said. "I'll show it to you in the taxi."

28

SCAR WAS OVER in Maxine's neighborhood, but in Kenny's house. Kenny was not very talkative. She finally told Scar she did not have a job.

"What happened to the one you had?" Scar said.

"I quit."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"Why?"

"I couldn't stand all that steam! It made me sick," Kenny said apologetically. "You mad at me?"

"Who, me? Naw. A laundry's a pretty hard place for a girl to work."

"I'm glad you're not mad," Kenny said. "Mama had a fit. She said I was no good. She said she spent eighteen years raising me and buying me decent clothes to wear and soon as I get up where I can help her out I'm too ornery to work."

"Say, it's not that bad," Scar said, seeing the tears starting to roll from Kenny's eyes.

"She's putting me out the house."

"The bitch."

"She's my mama."

"She's still a bitch."

"Alonzo, don't talk like that."

"Where you going to stay tonight?" Scar said.

"I don't know. I've got to be gone when Mama comes. I've been praying you'd come by tonight," Kenny said. "Let me stay with you till I find something."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I won't be no trouble," Kenny said. "I won't eat much."

"You don't get what I mean. A girl can't afford to put herself in that position."

"I gotta stay somewhere."

"Yeah, you gotta stay somewhere."

"Please!"

"I'd rather you wouldn't," Scar said.

Next day he went by for Kenny's clothes. Mrs. Waston was there. She came to the door just as Scar was putting the key into the lock. "I thought you would be at work," Scar said.

"I just knowed you would. Living in sin with my daughter. I spected as much first time I ever laid eyes on you. Oughta put the law on you. You needs to be in jail. That's where you both needs to be."

"Kenny needs to be at home."

"Don't you sass me in my house."

"I came for Kenny's clothes," Scar said.

"Give me the key you let yo self in here with."

"Not till I get Kenny's clothes."

"Well! Of all the damndest nerve. Get out of my house."

"I want Kenny's clothes."

"I'll bring 'em to you," Mrs. Waston raged. "You just get yo black ass out of my house!"

She brought Kenny's clothes to him all right. She threw them all over him while he stood out on the porch. Neighbors watched in idle curiosity.

"Hey, Jack," the cab driver, who was waiting for Scar, said. "You sure got yourself in a hornet's nest, didn't you?"

"I'm getting my ole lady out of one," Scar said.

"I just don't know what my daughter is getting into," Mrs. Waston said, taking the key from Scar.

"You should have thought of that when you put Kenny out," Scar said.

"Nigger, I'm tired of yo sass. Shut yo black mouth and get away from my do." She slammed the door in Scar's face. "Tell that no-good Kenny she ain't no daughter of mine no mo," Mrs. Waston screamed through the window at Scar as the cab pulled away. "And tell her not to come crying around here when she gets all bigged from messing around with you!" Mrs. Waston put a sweating, beefy palm on her throbbing temple. "I raised a no-good bitch. My baby, my baby," she sobbed.

Kenny wasn't there when Scar came back to the apartment loaded down with her clothes. The bed, which they had shared the night before, was neatly made. There was clean linen on the bed, Scar noted, and the floors had been swept. The dishes were gone from the sink. There were roses in the vase on the coffee table in the front room by the davenport. The clothes he had worn yesterday were not hanging on the nail outside the closet door where he had left them. He opened the closet and found them hanging neatly with the rest of his wardrobe. The three-room apartment was looking nice. It reminded him of how it looked when he

first moved in and had fixed it up. He had been surprised to find such a nice-looking furnished apartment in that section of town. He had loved the color scheme the first time he saw it. A blue living room, with a gray davenport and upholstered chair. A gray coffee table that matched the lamp table which held a balloon-shaped blue lamp. He had bought a small gray radio and set it on the table with the lamp. The bedroom was pink with blond bedroom furniture. The kitchen had gassed him too. The walls were ivory down midway to the black paneled wood that met the ivory halfway up the wall. The floors of the kitchen were inlaid linoleum, in large black and white checks. The bathroom followed the same color scheme of the kitchen, but what had really knocked him out were the hardwood floors. They were grimy and pocked with black marks when he first moved in, so much so that he had not realized they were hardwood. When he found out, he rented a sanding machine and got them looking nice again. Now, once every week, he waxed them. It was a crazy crib costing sixty-five a month, but to him it was worth it. The apartment house he lived in was behind a rundown shoeshine parlor. The apartment house rose two stories above the shine parlor. The outside of the house was ugly, blending with the other buildings. The insides of the apartments were something entirely different. It was hard to believe you could take a short walk, through that foul gangway between the shoeshine parlor and the tavern, walk up a few flights and run into something like this.

Scar put his clothes in the front-room closet and hung Kenny's clothes in the closet in the bedroom. She's a good kid, Scar thought. I wonder where she is?

Kenny walked until her feet were sore. It seemed to her that she tried every business downtown. Stores, factories,

plants, everything. She stopped by the employment office twice; once in the morning and later in the afternoon.

"The only thing we have open is for a dishwasher in the Astoria Hotel," a Negro woman clerk told Kenny, with an air of superiority, the second time when she came in.

"Don't you have anything like a stock girl, or drugstore clerk? I have a friend that's stock girl at Lane Bryant's."

"We only have what I said we have," the clerk said.

"What about hospital work?"

"I told you what we have."

"I took the Civil Service test," Kenny said. "But I haven't heard from them yet."

"They'll call you if you passed the test," the clerk said.

"But it's been over a month."

"Then you probably won't hear from them," the clerk said with a knowing smirk.

When Kenny came back to the apartment she found Scar lying on the davenport listening to the radio.

"Where you been, kid?" Scar said.

"Looking for a job."

"Any luck?"

"No. They offered me a job as dishwasher at the Astoria," Kenny said.

"That's no luck."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"You look funny, your eyes look glassy," Kenny said.

"Just waking up from being sleepy," Scar said. "I'm hungry."

"I'll fix supper," Kenny said. "What you want? You got a whole lot of stuff back there."

"I don't care. Anything," Scar said.

After eating, Scar put on his panama. "I got to go," he said.

"Why?"

"Got to get some bread to pay for these groceries."

"You working?"

"I'm making a living."

"Doing what?"

"This and that."

"What is this and that?"

"A hustle here and there," Scar said shrugging.

"You're going to get in trouble with the law."

"Naw, not for doing this," Scar said.

"Maybe you ought to teach me how to hustle."

Scar smiled. "Uh-uh. You stay here. Try to find you a job if you can."

29

"WHAT'S WITH THIS going to J City talk?" Monk said to Jake, who was sitting beside him in the front seat of his 1948 Lincoln.

"I got my reasons," Jake said.

"You know what you're asking?"

"Yeh, Monk, I know what I'm asking."

"Who you know in J City?"

"Nobody. I ain't trying to cut out, Monk. You know that."

"I don't know from nothing. That's what I'm trying to get straight." Monk flipped the glowing cigarette butt out of the car window and turned to face Jake. "Look, kid. I've just about got things set up in town like I like it. Soon as elections come along, I'll have everything clicking just right. I got every district in the swing. I got a good man

in each section, you follow me? I think I got a good man in each section," Monk said, looking at Jake.

"You know I wouldn't go against you, Monk. I ain't trying to cut out. Why should I? Ain't no other gig in town I can make this kind of bread."

"Then why this J City talk?"

"It's hard to explain," Jake said. "I — I dunno —"

"You know? You really want to know something? I looked around a long time before I found somebody in this section I figured could push without goofing. I had to find somebody who wasn't so old he'd figure he was a smart-assed punk that could hold out on me. Then I had to find somebody that was willing to take a chance and could keep his mouth shut while he was doing it. That's a pretty rough deal finding somebody like that, you know that? Besides that, this guy, I had in mind had to be smooth, the kind everybody likes and nobody asks questions about. He's got to be a pretty sharp boy, you know? 'Cause if he ever got excited, just a little bit, when the bims sorta happened to put on pressure, he was going to screw up, and in this business you can't afford to have no goof balls. Maybe I was wrong when I put my finger on this guy for the job. How 'bout that, huh?"

"I ain't trying to get out, Monk. I just got business in J City. What I thought you could do was let me push in J City and bring that stud here."

"A switch?"

"Yeh."

"Why should I?" Monk said. "What's with you anyway? In the first place you would hafta learn the ropes all over again in J City, 'cause none of these towns are ever set up the same way, and don't think they are. Then the guy I bring in from J would have to learn your section. That's a lot of trouble and risky. Don't seem very practical to me. How's it sound to you, kid?"

"O.K., all right, Monk, forget it," Jake said.

"Can't very well do that either. Would you forget it if you were in my shoes?"

"I ain't in your shoes, Monk."

"Naw, that's right, you ain't. I think they're a long ways too big for your feet, you know what I mean?"

"Damn, Monk, you think I—I ain't on the stuff, man, I just peddle it."

"Then talk sense. Let's have it. What's eating you?"

"Monk, let me ask you this. The best guy for doing anything is the guy who knows his business backwards and forwards and is happy doing it, right?"

"That's a real bright observation, kid."

"O.K., then, I ain't happy here. I got business in J City."

"What kind of business?"

"Nothing that's got anything to do with the org."

"Then I don't see hows I can let you go."

"Monk, have I ever crossed you? Haven't I always taken care of my end of everything?"

"So far."

"Then you gotta do me this favor. You just got to, that's all."

"Why?"

"It ain't—aw I just want to go to college, that's all."

"You what?"

"What's wrong with that? It won't hurt nothing, will it?"

"Naw, I don't see where it could. I just don't see your point, that's all."

Jake sat silent for a long time knowing Monk was watching him. "I got a girl going," he said.

"That's what's eating you?"

"It may not sound like much to you, Monk."

"You really go for the broad, huh?"

Jake shrugged. "Yeh, I go for her," he said.

"What's going to happen when she finds out where you're getting all those fancy clothes and pocket change?"

"Why should she find out?" Jake said.

"She's going to college, so she couldn't be lame. She's going to wonder and she's going to start asking questions."

"She don't ask no questions."

"She will. When you start thinking about a broad like that the next thing you know you're wanting to get married. You think she's going to marry you knowing you're doing something funny?"

"We ain't getting married," Jake said steadily.

"You'll get around to it."

"I ain't worried about it."

"You will, when you have to choose between her and the organization if she ain't the kind of babe that won't ask questions and go along with it, and most of 'em won't. Which way you riding when it gets down to that, kid?" Monk was staring at Jake hard. Jake lit a cigarette, getting his hands in action so they wouldn't betray him.

"You're talking crazy, Monk. You're just making a whole lot out of nothing," Jake said quietly.

"Look, kid. In this game you can't afford to like no dame, not the kind you got anyway. That's one reason I got you to push for me. You didn't let none of them broads get next to you. Now, you're so goofed, you want to run to college behind some dame. O.K.," Monk sighed. "Go on, chase the skirt, I don't give a damn."

"You mean I can go, Monk?"

"Yeh, I guess. But get it straight. You're going on business. I don't give a damn what you do in school, but don't you goof on the org's business. If you do — if a guy can't carry the ball, he's got to get off the team before he messes the team up, you know that?"

"Yeh, Monk. I know that," Jake said annoyed.

"O.K.," Monk snapped. "And you know what that means?"

Jake shifted in the seat. He looked at Monk. "Yeh, I know what that means," he said.

"O.K.," Monk said, brushing his hand across Jake's hair. "Go on with your skirt," he said smiling. "Now tell me something."

"Yeh, Monk."

Monk was still smiling. "When it gets down to choosing between me and the broad, which way you going to ride?"

"It won't get down to that."

Monk's smile broadened. "Suppose it does," he said.

"I'm with you, Monk." The cigarette tasted queer in his lips. "You know that."

"Yeh, sure," Monk said. He punched Jake playfully on the shoulder. "I'll make arrangements."

Monk was the only person Jake knew who could talk to him like that and get away with it. He liked Monk no matter what. Monk was like that.

Monk thought about it. He thought it over real careful like. *I'm with you, Monk, you know that.* Yeh, sure. He could bring in Joe. Joe was a bright boy. He could learn the new setup fast and Jake wouldn't have any trouble working into the routine at J City. Still, it just wasn't smart. But you had to keep the boys happy, didn't you? Jake was right about the guy doing the best job being the one that was happy doing it. It should work out. Yeh, sure. He knew his men, didn't he? He knew every guy in his organization. He knew 'em real good. He made it his business to. He knew the colored boys, the Dagos, the Poles, the Mexes, he knew 'em all. He knew. You were damn right he knew. He had spent all his life around the political precincts running the dirty jobs for the precinct bosses. He knew the city like

he knew his own mother, and he knew J City, and Callstown where he also had an org going. His org was solid. He had handpicked his men to peddle to the people they were a part of. His men really knew who they were pushing to because they pushed to members of their own race. He was smart, there was no doubt about it. He had really been smart to set it up like that. He had been real careful. Sure, he could trust the boys. *I'm with you, Monk, you know that.* He would be rich in five years. Just five more years was all it would take. Then he would get out, go some place and take it easy without any worries. He had that all figured out too. Yeh. If Jake goofed? Naw, he could trust Jake. Jake wouldn't run away from all that dough. Jake wasn't stupid. Jake was smart. And the elections, hadn't he fixed the elections? Could they touch him after the elections came in? Hell no, nobody could touch him, unless some joker — *I'm with you, Monk.* He knew that. He damn sure better know it.

30

SCAR DID NOT go into Booker's much any more. It was getting so he couldn't make any bread there. The night before last was the first night in weeks he could get enough studs in the game to make it worth while, and he had a bad night, of all the times to have a bad night, but that's the fugging breaks. He went down on Third Street, where the railroad tracks ran across Welch Street. A few years ago it would have been suicide to come in here without the rest of the T's. This was where he had got cut in a wild running gang fight between the T's and the Ratz. This was where Jake shot Bouie. Jake had really been wild then.

A wide, thick-lipped guy, resembling an icebox in height and build, squinted under the unblocked hat resting on his ears, straightened up and wiped his hands on his levi's and brushed at the blue chalk dust sprinkled on his rust-colored jacket.

"Well, I'll be damn," the guy said. "Hey, man, look who just breezed in."

"Hey, Scar, where you been?" the guys said, crowding around when he walked in the poolroom door.

"You know I live out west," Scar said. "I can't be associating with you 'cross-the-track bums." They laughed loud and long at that. "Hey, Perk," Scar said, speaking to the guy with the icebox build, "I hear you got respectable over the last two years. Not even Pres of the Ratz any more."

"I don't fight no wars no more," Perk said, "if that's what you mean."

"Neither do I," Scar said.

"I'm a pro now," Perk said. "I have my first fight next week."

"No kidding?"

"He'll bowl 'em over," one of the guys said. "They ain't never seen nothing like Perk."

"You can say that again," Scar said.

"Hey, remember the time we had that tough war when the Ratz and the T's was both trying to take over the town?"

"Man, I ain't going to never forget that," Scar said.

"Looks like I kinda left my mark on you," a thin weasel-faced guy said.

They felt each other out with laughter.

"Yeh, Frenchie, it's showing where I ain't never going to forget it."

They laughed nervously. It grew quiet.

"Those were some hell-of-a days," Perk said.

"Yeh," Scar drawled reminiscing. "Say, what happened to Bouie?"

"Bouie's in the hospital with TB. That slug clipped off half a lung," Perk said.

"Yeh?"

"Yeh."

"Tough," Scar said.

"Yeh, tough," Perk said.

"Man, we sure was a bunch of crazy studs in those days. You know something? I'm glad we stopped," Frenchie said.

"Yeh," Scar said. They laughed good and loud.

"What brings you down, Scar?"

"Getting too good for those punks down on the other end of town. Thought I'd come down and take some of you punks' bread."

"You hear that," Perk said, pointing at Scar. "This punk thinks he's a shark." The guys doubled up laughing.

"Dig, man. The cat thinks he can swing a cue across the green."

"Sucker crying to be picked."

"What's your game?" Perk said.

"You name it."

"You're on."

They got a New York game going on the front table. Eight players. Scar followed Perk. Frenchie followed Scar. Perk won the first game, making his balls before the others had a chance to shoot.

"You're pretty good," Scar said.

"Man, you ain't seen nothing yet. Wait till you see Frenchie execute."

"Frenchie'll be lucky if he gets a chance to get a decent shot," Scar said.

They laughed. Frenchie got two decent shots the whole

time they played. They played fifteen games at two bits a man. Scar won ten. It was a scramble among the others for the other five. Frenchie did not win a game. Looks changed from mockery to pure astonishment as Scar made the ball do everything but talk. Perk would constantly draw the cue ball behind other balls to keep Scar from a shot, only to see Scar play a combination of rails and hit the ball and even make a lot of those shots.

"I'm just warming up," Scar said.

"I'm just getting out," Perk said. "I know when I'm out-classed."

"Me too," the guys agreed.

"He's just lucky," Frenchie said.

"You play him heads up then."

"Not now, some other time, I'm tired now, man."

"You do that," Scar said. He hung around another half hour shooting the breeze.

31

THE WORDS OF Kenny's mother came back often to haunt Scar . . . *Tell her not to come crying around here when she gits all bigged from messing around with you.* Though he knew it was not in Kenny's best interests, he liked her staying around him. It helped him to forget, and that was important. He had to become adjusted to sleeping with someone. He got used to it after awhile and it caused no discomforts. It made them greedy for each other though.

"You're rough," she would say.

"Gentle as a lamb."

"You hurt me."

"You seem to like to be hurt."

"Are you sorry I moved in with you?"

"Sometimes."

"When?"

"When you're not swarming all over me and I can think straight."

"You're not human."

"What you mean?"

"You want to do it all the time."

"You're the one. You won't stay on your side of the bed," Scar said.

They laughed.

"Why do you play the radio all night?"

"So I can hear music when I sleep."

"You're crazy." They tussled with each other. "Why don't you offer me one of your old cigarettes?" Kenny said, watching Scar light up and blow smoke rings toward the ceiling.

"You don't smoke."

"Teach me."

"You're the one who'll be choking," Scar said. He lit a cigarette for Kenny and showed her how to inhale. She tried it. She choked. "I warned you," Scar laughed.

That's the way it went. Sometimes Kenny would jump out of bed at two in the morning. "I'm hungry," she would say. She would pester Scar so much with questions about what he wanted to eat that Scar would end up in the kitchen with her. About that time "Birdland" would be coming in very clear over the radio. Scar would want to go back to bed with his sandwiches, but Kenny would not let him. Finally, they would get back in bed and listen to the radio and talk for hours. It was nights like these that led to Kenny feeling

so sleepy in the morning she could not get up to go looking for a job. There were a lot of nights like that.

Kenny looked though. She wore out her saddle oxfords walking from place to place. She found a few things, dish-washing jobs, but had made up her mind, she was not going to take that. Scar bought her two pairs of strollers.

"Why'd you do that?" Kenny said.

"You can't be running around on highheel pumps all day."

Scar floated from poolroom to poolroom looking for a game. He did all right, and there were always the sticky dice with Spider. Once he went back on Third Street and saw Frenchie. They played nine ball for a dollar a game. In an hour Scar had \$20 of Frenchie's money in his pocket.

"You might as well admit it," Perk said. "He's too good for you."

"Man, I dig," Frenchie said. Frenchie was sick. He had worked all night long carrying a tray through the steaming kitchen to the dining room at the Astoria for that \$20.

"See you around," Scar said.

"Yeh."

"That lucky bastard. I should have killed him when I had the chance," Frenchie said.

"You might not get no other chance," Perk said.

So went the summer.

32

THE MARSHALL HIGH football team practiced in the frosty air that was nipping away at Indian summer, the scrubs of three years ago this year's first string. The days were long,

golden, and lazy. Red stood on the corner across from the school in a houndstooth topcoat with a french collar and raglan sleeves. Red wondered how in hell he was going to get the bread to feed his habit. He gave up trying to keep his heavy eyes focused on the girls streaming out of the school.

"What's happening, Red?"

"Your world, man, I can't even pay the rent to live in it." Red wondered where Scar was keeping himself lately. He had not seen Scar since a couple of days after Jake went off to college. That was a joke, Jake in college. Man! Get a load of that. He wondered what was doing with Scar.

Scar had not seen any sense in going over by Marshall High. It just did not seem worth while any more. Booker looked up in surprise when Scar strolled in the door.

"Say, where you been, President?" Booker said.

"Seeing the town through poolroom doors," Scar said. "You punks around here won't let me play enough to make any bread."

"Name of this joint ain't the Salvation Army," Booker said. "If you looking for a game, you might as well leave now."

"Just came in to shoot the breeze," Scar said.

"How's Jake cutting it in college?" Booker wanted to know.

"Haven't heard from him," Scar said.

"Seems like you should have heard from him by now," Booker said.

"He's only been gone three weeks."

"Seems longer than that. When he leave? Round the second week in September?"

"Yeh."

"He's sure gone behind that broad," Booker said. "When

a guy gets carried away like that the next thing you know he's getting married."

"I guess you're the voice of experience," Scar said.

"You just watch what I tell you," Booker said.

Guys started drifting in. The after-school crowd.

"Hey, Scar."

"What's to it, Scotty?"

"You know my story. Heard your boy went to college."

"Yeh."

"What he want to go do that for?"

"He followed his ole lady up there," Booker said.

"Man, some guys'll do anything for trim. Hey Leo, how 'bout a nice sociable game of nine ball?" Scotty said.

"Suits me."

"I'm in," Butch said.

"I'll chalk a cue on the deal," Scar said.

"If you're in, I'm out," Leo said.

"Me too."

"See what I mean," Scar said winking at Booker.

Over on Peabody Avenue the kids started the football game on the weed-filled lot next to the alley. Peabody was littered with leaves and paper. All along the block people swept the scurrying leaves into crumbling piles and burned them in the street even though the city had an ordinance prohibiting it. Peabody Avenue smelled of burning leaves and living. Down in the grocery store Pop Garveli waited on his lone customer with bodily movements as brisk as the gathering wind.

"Going to turn cold soon," Pop said. "How's Jake doing?"

"All right I reckon. I don't hear from him. He ain't wrote."

"That's the way with youngsters," Pop said. "Glad to see him go to school. He's a smart boy."

"You ain't no gladder than me," Adams said laughing. "That boy had me worried for awhile, the way he was running around."

"They all go through that."

"Yeh. He went through his share and about everybody else's too."

Pop laughed. "He was an active one all right."

"How's Georgia?" Adams wanted to know.

"Fine, she graduates next year you know. Going to send her off to college too," Pop said proudly.

"Good. You can't beat education."

"Naw, you sure can't," Pop said.

"They sure grow up fast."

"Sure do. Remember when Georgia and Jake were little bitty ole things running around here. They used to get into more trouble." Pop wiped his hands on his apron, his eyes slightly out of focus remembering.

"Seems like just yesterday when Jake's mother was still living —" Adams trailed off.

"I guess you miss her. What I mean —"

"Yeh. Yeah, I sure do."

"Ever think of marrying again?"

"Naw," Adams said. "She was the onliest one I ever met I wanted to make going to bed with legit."

"I guess you don't meet 'em often," Pop said.

"Naw."

"Must have been rough bringing a young one up without a mother for over half of his life. I know me and Maude have plenty of trouble, the both of us, trying to get Georgia along."

"Well, Jake is funny. He ain't never gave me no real trouble, but he ain't never let me get to really know him, like he did his mother," Adams said callously, which was the only way he knew how to cover up his bewilderment.

"He's a good kid, a damn good kid. I wouldn't worry about him none if I was you, Adams."

"Hi, Pop. Hello, Mr. Adams," Georgia said, coming down the steps leading from upstairs into the store.

"Hi, Georgia," Adams said.

"I think it's wonderful about Jake. Going to college and all, I mean. Pop's going to send me when I get out of high school next year, ain't you, Pop?"

"I was just telling Adams about it," Pop said.

"Isn't it just wonderful? About college and all, I mean," Georgia said.

33

RAIN FELL in September. The water gathered in the gutters and pushed against the curb, careening off and spinning down into the sewers on the corners. The kids stopped playing football on the lot of trampled dying weeds. They ran through the alley, which was now a bed of tiny streams picking courses through the bumpy brick pavement. Housewives dashed through the storm to rescue the weekly washing drowning on the clothesline. Lightning explored the heavens in snaky, fiery streaks. Thunder made a lot of noise.

Scar looked out of the poolroom door with heavy-eyed indifference. His habit was on and he didn't give a damn whether the guys caught on or not. It was getting so now that his habit was interfering with his game. The price was going up, skyrocketing, and the skill was dropping. He remembered his proud boast to Jake that he could get off the habit. How many million years ago was that? He watched the rain fall with heavy-eyed indifference.

The rain let up. Vapor like water floated slowly down to earth like fine particles of snow. The autumn wind whipped it along in short snappy breaths, stirring up the fallen leaves lying in the gutters and on the yards, sweeping the leaves, the trash, and the mist into a miniature tornado, leaves, trash and rain falling from the main body of the scooped-up refuse like a tail.

Down on the corner from the poolroom Red leaned against the sleeping, deserted Paradise, his houndstooth coat hugging his emaciated frame, the collar burrowing under his neck, the blue suede unblocked hat pressing his ears. Red's clinched eyes cried at the mist, the black, puffed bags under them standing like muscles in his fleshless face. He couldn't stop the shakes. Goddammit, there was only one way to stop the shakes. He balled his hands tighter in his pockets against the insistent pulsating pressure of his tortured body. He wondered how his legs managed to hold him up. All that he owned, he wore on his back. The last suit pawned in Judiheimer's. Walk across the street, right next to the Circle Theater, and look into the pawnshop. Go back into the long tomblike back room. There you would find Red, hanging on the racks in suits, sport coats, shoes, pants; you could even find him on a radio, and yes a wristwatch, and a few rings. He was in Judie's locked up tight. He was hocked, but good; he couldn't figure the formula for getting his soul out of pawn. Float me on the clouds, man, with a mainline kick. Red fingered the eighteen crisp one-dollar bills, the guarantee of peace for another day. Why didn't he come on?

A city trash truck grunted down the alley behind Welch Street, the back of the truck ringing to the clink of bottles recently picked up from the rear of the Paradise. Two hundred and thirty-five pounds, spread over a six-foot frame, swung rusty containers of dripping, soggy trash, ashes, tin,

bottles, misplaced garbage and goo into the back of the complaining truck. Two wiry, unshaven working mates went through the same tiring process with the energy-saving, methodical rhythm of men who had worked hard all their lives.

"What ah mess," the huge, red-faced man said.

"Quit beefing, Clint, my boy. One more load and we finish for the day."

"Never seen a boot neighborhood yet weren't ah mess."

"I ain't never seen a trash can wasn't a mess for that matter," one of the men said, grunting from the strain of a tub of trash.

"Shut up, youse guys. You get on me arsh," the third man said.

"Now, Kelly, my boy —"

"My boy, my boy. That's all he knows. My boy!"

"Well, ah ain't goin' be with you boys much longer," the huge red-faced guy said. "Soon as elections —"

"There he be harping 'bout his connections —"

"Is that how you got your present *position*, Clinty ole boy? Through connections? I just goes down and fills me out an application."

The two men laughed.

"Gaw'n, laugh. You ah see when elections come round. Ah be laughing at you bad-smelling asses then."

"You might try sniffing your own armpits awhile, my boy."

"Move her, Mac," the third man said. The tobacco-chewing driver, daydreaming in the cab of the truck, put the truck in gear. The truck grunted over the bumpy, brick-paved alley.

Two small brown faces peered out at the alley through a rickety wooden gate. "Hurry and dump it, Betty. Here comes ole Trashwagon."

The little girl dropped her bag of rubbish over the gate

into the trash can by the gate in the alley. The bag burst and showered a mixture of paper, eggshells and coffee grounds over the ashes in the can, some of the rubbish splashing over and down the sides of the container.

"Trashwagon, Trashwagon, here comes ole Trashwagon," they chanted.

The huge man's face turned to fuchsia. He dropped the basket of ashes he was lifting, and it rolled on its sides spewing its contents along the brick alley in a circular trail. "Ah'll learn ya," Clint yelled, charging down the alley. The kids fled, terrified by the mountain of angry man with rage chewing up his features.

"Mama," they yelled. Their raincoats, made shiny by the drizzle, flapped heavily in the rain. "Mama — " As fast as they could go they went, splashing down the muddy path leading to the big frame house. A dog yelped hysterically and was answered by other dogs all down the alley. The squatty, bowlegged bulldog raced out to the back of the yard and tried to get his huge mouth under a gap in the fence by Clint's leg. The big guy stood there, his leg an inch from the bulldog's face. He stood there shouting, cords standing out rigid in his neck, strands of sandy hair, dangling from his hat, swinging over his face.

"Ah'll learn ya, gowdamn niggers!" he said.

The frustrated bulldog snapped madly at the air, a nasty growl vibrating from his throat.

"At the age they be to know no better."

"Ah'll learn ya, scrawning, stealing, stanking — " the bulldog managed to catch the end of one of Clint's pants cuffs. "Get duh hell out duh way fo ah ram yo teeth dawn yo throat!" Clint kicked sharply against the fence knocking the bulldog from the cuff. The bulldog tried vainly to get through the fence; his nasty growl rode the air.

"He's crazy," Mac said from the cab of the truck, watching Clint raging hoarsely with the mist rolling down his face.

"Ah'll learn ya, gowdammit. Just wait till elections. Wait till ah'm on the force. Ah'll learn 'em."

The complaining truck groaned and began to shudder over the bumpy alley, flanked on both sides by cans laden with rubbish and the long rows of broken picket fences sagging as if tired of trying to stand up. Leaves, heavy with cold water, plastered the alley, shivered in the cold autumn wind.

"Joe," Red said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"You talking to me?"

"Yeh."

"How you know my name?"

"I know everybody that pushes," Red managed to say before the convulsions caught him. "I need a fix, man, b-bad," he stammered.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Joe said.

"Don't screw around, man. Can't you see I'm splitting my wig?" Red grabbed Joe by the arm in desperation.

"I don't know you, baby," Joe said. "I don't even know what you're talking about."

"I got bread, man, look!" Red brought the eighteen dollars out of his pocket with his left hand. "You straight man, just straighten me."

"I don't know you, baby," Joe said again, brushing Red's hand away from his arm as if it were a dried up twig that had fallen on him from a decaying tree. The convulsions caught Red again. By the time he straightened up Joe was across the street.

"Hey, Joe! Hey, wait!" Red knew he could not go back to Ricky because he still owed him twelve dollars. He had to have that fix.

The city trash truck groaned around the corner, bottles

jingling. "Joe, Joe!" Red dashed out into the street. The truck groaned —

Red saw his fifteen-dollar blue suede hat go sailing down the street; he caught one vivid flash of Fourteenth and Welch. He never knew he left the ground.

"Goddamn!" Mac said.

"Ah tole that nigger tuh watch out!"

The three men in the back of the truck hurdled the sides. The crowd was already gathering.

"Is he dead?"

"I dunno."

"Stand back," the tobacco-chewing Mac said. "Goddammit, Clint, stand back!"

Down the block they poured out of Booker's Billiard Parlor, pool sticks still in their hands.

"Who is it?"

"Dunno, never seen him before."

"That guy knows," a dark, fat woman loaded down with groceries said, pointing at Joe. "They was talking to each other."

Joe looked at the crowd and cursed himself for coming back to gape at the junkie lying in the street. What would Monk say if — ? Joe took off his hat and brushed the long wavy hair back in place. Everyone was looking at him. "I don't know who he is," Joe said, widening his eyes on his thin, boyishly handsome face. "He tried to put the bum on me for a quarter. That's all I know." The eyes of the crowd darted quickly back to Red, lying in the street with his left leg twisted under him, the right side of his body mangled and pumping blood, some of the dollar bills still clutched in his left hand. The crowd followed the trail of money lying in a ragged path into the sewer among the twigs, leaves, and rubbish carried by the current in the gutter. "That's all I know,"

Joe insisted. Jesus, he had to get out of here, if Monk ever found out —

“For Christ sake, somebody call a ambulance,” Mac said.

“I call one already,” a short man in eyeglasses said. He gasped when he saw Red.

“You know the guy?” Mac said.

“Sure, I know him already.”

“Who is he?” Mac said. “Stand back. Jesus, stand back everybody.”

“Hey! That’s Ralph Ewing,” Leo said, coming into the crowd puffing, with a cue stick still in his hand.

“Sure is,” Scotty said. “Man! He looks dead.”

“He come to my shop fifteen minutes ago!”

“He sure looks dead,” Scotty said, shaking his head.

The crowd looked at Mac.

“He came running out in the street when I turned the corner,” Mac said, spreading his hands helplessly. “He came running out of nowhere.”

“Ah tole him tuh watch out. Ah tole that nigger!” Clint insisted.

“Say, man, you in the wrong neighborhood to be saying that,” Scotty said.

“Yeh, who you calling nigger?” Leo said.

“Stand back. You trying to kill him? Give him a chance to breathe,” Mac said desperately.

“Where you from, baby?” Leo said to Clint.

“That’s Trashwagon,” someone said. “One of them pecks from down home.”

The poolroom boys started closing in on Clint.

“Maybe we better send him back down home. He don’t like it up here,” Scotty said softly, swaggering toward Clint with the pool stick held over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

“Don’ ya start nothing,” Clint said.

"You got it wrong, baby," Leo said. "We're finishing it."
"Stop it!" Mac shouted, pushing Scotty away from Clint. The guys looked at Mac astonished. "This boy's lying here hurt bad, maybe dying even," Mac said frantically, "and you're getting ready to trample him because of something that goddamn Clint called you. So he said nigger! So what? Nigger! Boot, spook, kike, wop, coolie, greaseball, peckerwood, kraut, chink, spik, polack, coon, rebel, ofay, sheeny, you name 'em! I—I can't think of 'em all. But I know this—" He paused sucking in his breath. The crowd was silent, stunned. "Ain't none of them words never hurt nobody as bad as that boy lying down there. Well, damn it," Mac shoved his fists into his hips. "Fight if you want to. Go on, I don't give a damn if you hang that damn Clint to the telephone wires! But don't you, don't nobody—you hear me! Don't nobody lift a finger around that boy. Not unless you want to whip me too. I hit him, yeh, that's right! I might have killed him even," Mac said softly, with his head downcast. Then he raised his head, his eyes blazing defiantly. "But I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you trample all over him, not as long as I'm living, I ain't. Now stand the hell back! That goes for you too, Clint, damn it!" Mac shoved Clint away from Red.

"Wait till elections," Clint said. "Wait till elections."

"Aw, shut the hell up," Clint's working mate Kelly said, advancing on Clint with his fists balled.

Scotty looked at Clint for a long minute. Mingled emotions shuffled across his face. He slammed the pool stick to the ground and walked away. The poolroom boys followed him.

The ambulance sped up the street, its warning jarring through the sound of the murmuring crowd. Two squad cars darted around the southeast corner and stopped.

"I'm getting out of here," Booker said, suddenly feeling unprotected without the rest of the poolroom guys around.

"Nobody's going anywhere," a policeman said brushing through the crowd. "What's going on here?"

"Give them room," the other policeman said as the men carrying a stretcher approached the onlookers.

"That boy with the pretty hair was talking to him just before it happened," the fat grocery-laden woman said.

Everyone looked around for Joe. Joe was gone.

Scar leaned back on the wall of the deserted poolroom staring with heavy-eyed indifference at the rain.

Kenny wanted to tell Scar all about Red as she had heard about it over the radio, but Scar would not listen. Kenny and Scar went to Red's funeral. There were a lot of people from Marshall High there. Scar stared at the coffin with heavy-eyed indifference. The preacher's words did not make any sense. He could not hear the preacher, he could not even hear Kenny . . . a million years ago — fugg it. They walked around to peer at Red in the coffin. Scar stared at Red heavy-eyed with indifference. He did not even see him.

DAYS, DAYS, DAYS, ministrate autumn colors. The period runs its cycle. Days — cold days. Winter haunts the moon. The trees bow threadbare branches and quiver in the howling gale. Smoke belches from the chimneys in puny breaths and dashes frantically in the atmosphere. Dull, warm light peeps from lowered window shades and blinking venetian blinds.

The people stay indoors. The people who are not the barflies, the hustlers, the corner boys. The corner boys stay on the block, under the lamppost, huddled together, waiting . . . Days, and the elections, and Monk is in. Days . . . the bonfires glow. Chanting high school kids form human chains and crowd the sidewalk, their voices fill the city. Gang wars among teen-agers flare in the public school stadium. The officials are glad the football season is drawing to a close. The public service system reluctantly opens its doors to the charging teen-age football crowd. The streetcars rock to youthful enthusiasm. Days . . .

"Looks like your daughter now," Mrs. Arnez said, looking out of the window and seeing a black Buick glide into the curb in front of the house.

"I still don't think it was a good idea letting her ride up here by car instead of coming by train."

"Oh, it was just a three-hour ride," Mrs. Arnez said. "I think it was rather cute."

"Edna, sometimes I don't understand you."

Mrs. Arnez watched Armenta and Jake come up the steps of the porch, a torrent of words pouring from Armenta, the flash of white teeth as they suddenly laughed about something, lord knows what. It made Mrs. Arnez feel good. It brought back memories.

Armenta came bouncing in the door all out of breath, saying a hundred things at once. "School's wonderful," they finally managed to decipher.

"You must be hungry," Armenta's mother said.

"Not too hungry, Mom. We stopped on the way back and got something to eat."

"How are you doing in school?" Mrs. Arnez wanted to know.

"Oh, so-so."

"What's so-so?" Henry Arnez shook his head, giving up hope of ever getting a decent answer out of his youngest daughter.

"Oh, Daddy," Armenta said laughing. "I'm getting mostly A's and B's, but I got some C's in algebra."

Mr. Arnez was pleased. "Sounds pretty good to me."

"Jake's got a straight A average in Biological Science," Armenta said. "He's real smart when he wants to be."

"Are you still hanging around that bird? I thought you just came home with him because you both lived in the same city?"

"Well, we have a couple classes together."

"Humph."

"Mother, why doesn't Dad like Jake? He's never —"

"I *don't* like him and I want you to stay away from him. I told you that when I wrote you. I told you a hundred times —"

"Henry, it's the Thanksgiving holidays. There's no sense in spoiling it by going into all that."

"Mother, I —"

"That's enough, Armenta. Your father's upset. He was worried about you having an accident on the highway."

"Jake's a good driver."

"Jake, Jake, Jake! That's all I hear out of that girl. Don't mention his name again in this house. And you're taking the train back to J City, young lady."

"We'll talk about it some other time," Mrs. Arnez said. "Let's eat before supper gets cold."

That was when it was that Armenta began to hate her father.

JAKE, SCAR, AND SPIDER sat at the bar in the Zodiac. Spider was full of life because they had won \$150 in a crap game. "Say, man, this is a crazy Thanksgiving, huh?"

"Yeah," Jake said softly.

"Yeh," Scar murmured.

Jake looked at Scar hard. "Get off it, man." Jake was scared. He was actually scared for Scar. "Get off it before it kills you," he said gruffly.

"I don't know what you're talking about, man," Scar said slowly. Scar's eyes looked as if they had pinpoints stuck in them, they were contracted so tight. Scar scratched the dull itch. He scratched his body. "Man, I'm floating," he said lazily.

Jake bumped Scar hard. "Man, straighten up. Come on, Scar," Jake whispered fiercely.

"Cool it, Pres," Scar said. "Spider knows I'm floating. He's still my friend."

"I dug it a month ago, right around when Red got killed," Spider said.

"Goddammit, Scar, everybody'll know if you don't straighten up. You know what they do to junkies!"

"Fugg it," Scar said.

"Scar."

"Fugg it."

Jake motioned to Spider. They grabbed Scar and got him the hell out of there.

"Fugg it."

They took Scar home and put him to bed. "He had one too many," Jake told Kenny who was watching perplexedly.

"Oh," Kenny said. Kenny looked as if she was going to cry. "Why does he drink so much? He drinks himself sick

all the time. He started doing it right after you went to J City."

"He'll be all right," Jake said. "We'll see you tomorrow, huh?"

"You going to bring Armenta with you?"

"Armenta won't be making it."

"Oh."

"It ain't because you're shacking — you living with Scar ain't got nothing to do with it," Jake said. "Her family's making her spend the holidays with them."

"Oh."

"We'll see you, Kenny," Spider said.

Out in the car Jake drove around pointlessly.

"We could have made at least another hundred if Scar hadn't been floating," Spider said.

"Yeh. Half the time he missed his cue," Jake said dully.

"Man, I could have used that loot. I'm getting married," Spider said.

"Yeh, I heard."

"Yeh!" Spider suddenly turned around to Jake. "Say, man, you don't sound none too happy yourself. Neither one of you studs is on my cloud."

"Such is life in the big city," Jake said. Things were happening too fast. Armenta telling him not to call any more and that she was not riding back to school with him. And Scar acting like a trick. Armenta had not given him an explanation. Just don't call any more. What had he done? What kind of babe was she anyway? Thanksgiving. Yeh.

"Where you going, man?" Spider said.

"You name it."

"I don't care," Spider said. Spider's good feeling was leaving.

"Let's take her out on the highway," Jake said.

Jake went all the way out Welch until he hit 66. He opened the Buick up. They sped along the highway scaring the drivers in cars they passed. Jake did seventy-five around a curve.

"Man, you crazy," Spider said.

"Yeh." Jake started laughing.

"You're drunk."

"Yeh." Jake laughed and pressed the accelerator to the floor. At one hundred miles an hour the highway was a blur. They smeared over the highway.

Spider started laughing at Jake laughing.

"You're drunk," Jake said.

"Yeh."

They guffawed. They sailed down the highway laughing and speeding for all they were worth. A squad car chased them for ten miles flagging for them to pull over. They finally did.

"Where in hell ya think ya going?" a big, red-faced cop said. He grew even redder when he saw Jake and Spider in the car.

"What's happening, Pres?" Jake said laughing.

"Why, nig —"

"That's enough, Clint," a bespectacled officer said. "Let's see your driving license."

"You been on the force long?" Jake said.

"Yah do the answering," Clint said. "Dammit, show him dah license like he ask yah."

"Who's the rook — Hey, Pres, didn't you use to work on the garbage truck?"

Clint jerked Jake straight up in the seat with one huge hand.

"Leave him alone, Clint," the other officer said, chopping Clint's hand away from Jake's collar.

"You damn right," Spider said. "That's against the law."

Jake was now completely sober. "Mister, I don't play that," he said quietly through clenched teeth.

Clint started to reach for Jake again, but the other officer pushed him away. "You better get your license out, buddy," he said.

"You're wasting your time," Jake said cockily. "I'm a friend of Monk's."

"Oh, yeh," Clint said.

"Yeh," Jake said. He gave the other officer his license. "You can check."

"We'ah do that," Clint said. "And God help ya if ya pulling ah fast one!"

Jake thought about it for the rest of the night. He would have to do something about that Trashwagon guy. He had a lot of things to do though. It could wait.

36

SPIDER LOOKED in the window of Judiheimer's at the engagement and wedding-ring sets. He wasn't going to buy no wedding rings from Judie though, hell no. He just wanted to look at 'em and kinda get a idea of what to expect when he went downtown to one of those big jewelry stores. Man, he would be getting married next month. Wasn't that something? He looked critically at the rings, paying special attention to the ones with the gawdy, glittering stones.

It was a cold day, the kind when the wind makes your nose cry. As usual Welch Street was filled with scurrying people. A squad car patrolled lazily down the street with a disinter-

ested eye out for trouble. The three-o'clock-in-the-afternoon-whiskyheads crowded the bars, drinking silently, unlike the boisterous night inhabitants who could never remain silent over a drink.

A blind man, new to this section of town, attracted by the noise, decided this was the ideal corner to peddle his pencils. Small boys, from eight to ten years old, chased a crying fugitive through the back alley of the thirteen-hundred block of Welch Street.

"Junior! Stop all that racket down there and go get me a loaf of bread," a stout, dark woman said, tossing a coin from the second-floor window down into a crowd of teen-agers on the sidewalk below. It was a typical day.

Two ragged jalopies pulled up in front of the Paradise and stopped. Twelve guys descended from the jalopies. Guys in their late teens who wore heavy leather jackets with a gray fish with bared teeth painted on the back of the jackets.

"Remember, you studs, when Specs walks in the poolroom — wait a minute. There's one of them across the street," the guy with narrow eyes, thick lips, and conked hair said.

"Naw, Slits, that ain't one of 'em," Specs said.

"That's Spider, and he's one of them," Slits said. "Here's where you get your chance to get even, Specs, if you ain't chicken."

"You know damn well I ain't chicken, Slits."

"I know you ain't chicken against boys, but we getting ready to do action with the T's. That frigging bastard Jake Adams ain't going to like it, and that's gonna make me feel real good, you know?"

"Let's make contact, man." The Cooters started drifting.

The blind man on the corner tapped his cane against the unfamiliar sidewalk and shivered. He heard the sound of many approaching footsteps. The blind man twisted his

features into what he thought was a smile, exposing blackened teeth. "Help the poor," the blind man said. "Help the poor and handicapped."

"I'm the poor," Slits said and knocked the cane from the blind man's hand. The guys laughed at the blind man's feeble effort to find the cane.

Spider turned around. "Say, man, you studs run out of playmates?" he said. He retrieved the blind man's cane and gave it to him. "Man, you can't make no bread on this corner in that racket," Spider told the blind man. "What's going on, Slits?"

"You tell me," Slits said. The guys shifted around nervously.

"Man, you're in the wrong section to find any Counts."

"I'm wise," Slits said.

Spider shrugged. He turned his back to the Barracudas and looked in the pawnshop window. The guys stood around not saying anything. Spider noticed them still around him by their reflections in the window and grew uneasy. He wasn't worried though, nobody goofed with the T's. Anyway, he was a man now, and getting married. He didn't belong to the T's no more. He turned around. "You guys looking for somebody?"

"Naw," Slits said.

"Well, I'll see you then, man," Spider said walking off.

The guys looked at Slits hesitantly. Slits seemed annoyed. "Specs," he said.

Specs ran up behind Spider and hit him in the back of the neck with a fist packed tight around a roll of pennies, a handkerchief around the knuckles. Spider's eyes popped wide, more in amazement than pain, although the blow sent him reeling into the brick wall of the pawnshop and he had to fight to keep from blacking out. He swung as he turned,

catching Specs along the bridge of the nose and sending his eyeglasses flying out into the street. Spider kicked Specs in the groin and brought a knee under Specs' chin when he folded over. Then the others were swarming around him. Sweat broke out on his face, he punched, kicked, gouged, bit, and yelled at the swirling mob raining blows upon him. From somewhere in the crowd the deadly sound of an opening switchblade clicked in the air. Now Spider fought silently, panicky. He was fighting for his life.

After awhile it didn't hurt any more. Then he really got scared because he knew he could not stand up any longer. Down at the other end of the block the police patrol car turned lazily around the corner going off Welch Street. The blind man, cold, nervous, and scared, tapped his cane frantically on the sidewalk, while heavy, white-stitched soles of popular teen-aged shoes descended on the prostrate Spider. Spider rolled over on his stomach and covered the back of his head with his hands. Shoes thundered against his body.

"Jim! I think we mighta killed him," a small, skinny guy said to Slits in the car.

"Tough."

"We ain't never stomped nobody that bad before," the skinny guy said.

"What's the matter? It bothering you, Morty?" Specs said. Specs' nose was bleeding. His lips were swollen. It hurt Specs to talk.

"Damn, I think we killed him!"

"Specs asked you a question," Slits said.

Morty looked at Slits. Slits' eyes were almost closed. They were shifting. Fast, flickering around like moths or something, like they was crazy . . .

"Did it bother you, Morty?" Slits said.

"Naw! Naw — hell, why should it?" Morty said. "I was just wondering why you had it in for the guy, that's all."

"I didn't have it in for him," Slits said, his maroon eyes darting beneath the almost closed lids.

"Then why the treatment?"

"You getting nosy? You getting to wondering what the Cootas going to be doing next?"

"Naw, Slits," Morty said spreading his hands. "I was just wondering, that's all."

"Well, don't. When I sight the object you just make the contact, O.K.?" Slits' darting eyes danced over the rest of the guys in the car. He settled back in the seat tight-lipped. "I didn't have nothing against that stud. He just happens to be one of Jake Adams' boys is all." Suddenly Slits pushed away from the back of the seat and bolted into an upright position. "Look, you guys, I'm the Pres of this org and I ain't got to answer to nobody. Don't be making with the questions, see. You guys better listen and listen close. You been begging for real action. Well, you going to get it. You damn sure going to get it. The T's will be looking for us 'fore the night's over, so you better have your hardware ready, 'cause that's the kind of war it's going to be."

37

"THEY GAVE it to him bad," Scotty said.

"Spider?" Jake said quietly.

"Yeh, Spider. I knew you'd want to know. That's why I came over to your house."

"You're the Pres of the T's now, Scotty."

"Only 'cause you stepped down."

"Get the boys and tell them to meet me at Booker's at eight o'clock."

"O.K."

"In full combat equipment," Jake said, his voice hardly audible.

Jake drove over to Scar's place and let himself in with his key. Scar was still in bed and Kenny was not there. "Man, you wanna sleep all day?" Jake said, shaking Scar awake.

"Say, man," Scar said sleepily. "I had a terrible hang this morning, so I went back in the sack."

"I told you about that junk."

"Junk? Wasn't no junk, man. It was that scotch. Junk don't hang you till you can't get it."

"Remember that punk I put in the hospital?"

"Bouie?"

"Evidently he's got a whole family of goofs."

"Who you talking about?"

"His kid brother."

"Slits, man?"

"Yeh."

"He didn't have the nerve to tangle with no T's man?"

"Didn't he?"

"Well, we ain't in no more."

"Neither is Spider, but that's who they got to."

Scar did not say anything. He got up and put on his clothes. You're never out. And don't you forget that. Never.

"Bouie could stand some company," Jake said quietly. "But he ain't going to get it from his brother, unless he starts spending his time in the graveyard."

Scar didn't say anything. Jake was talking crazy, but Scar was feeling crazy. "I wonder where Kenny is," Scar said. "It's after six, she should be back by now."

Jake and Scar got in the car and started over to the city hospital. On the radio, in the car, the commentator talked of how blessed the nation was in the year of our Lord nineteen-hundred-and-forty-eight, another year free from war. The commentator talked of the good Christian families in good Christian America, who said a good Christian blessing before a good Christian Thanksgiving dinner and pitied the millions of people, in other parts of the world, who had so much less to be thankful for from the bottom of their good Christian hearts. Scar turned the radio off.

38

EVELYN SAT in a chair by Spider's bed in the hospital ward. "Why?" she said over and over. "Lord, why?"

"It's O.K., baby, I just threw craps," Spider said, trying to laugh.

"But why, Bert? Why did they do it? You don't belong to a gang any more. All the times I thought it would happen it never did, now for no reason —"

"Aw, Jake punched some punk belonging to the Cootas one day in front of the school. I guess they getting even," Spider said.

"Jake! I wish it was him instead of you."

"Evelyn."

"I'm sorry, Bert. But — but he did it. Why didn't they get him instead of you? You didn't do nothing to nobody. Why does God let things like that happen?"

"My back feels funny," Spider said. "I can't feel my legs."

That's funny, ain't it? Hey, what you sniffing about? Just 'cause I got a patch over one eye and a hicky over the other don't mean I'm dying. I'll be kicking around good as new, you watch."

"Bert," Evelyn said, turning away from him.

"You don't like me no more 'cause I got sores all over my face," Spider kidded her.

Evelyn put her face down on the bed by Spider's chest. Her shoulders contracted sharply. She made no sound.

"Gee, gee Evelyn," Spider said moved. "I really think you're goofed behind me."

The tears fell.

"Gee, I feel funny. I feel funny as hell."

"Bert."

"Gee," Spider said.

Jake and Scar came in. Evelyn did not look up. She didn't look up the whole time they were there. She heard Jake and Scar kidding Spider and Spider kidding right back. She heard Jake and Scar telling Spider they were going to take care of the Cootas, about the war starting that night. She remembered times when the Termites were fighting some gang across town and how often she told Spider how silly it was, and how she had told Jake the same thing. She remembered the years of fighting. Now it was starting all over again. Now, it didn't matter much any more what they did.

They made her leave Spider at eight because visiting hours were over. She told the doctor she was Spider's sister. She could not stand not knowing how badly Spider was hurt. When she left the hospital nothing mattered any more. The doctor would have to tell Spider sometime. She knew how he would feel. She even knew what he would say. And all because Jake Adams was still acting like a fool and going around punching people in the nose. She thought of all the sacri-

fices, the struggling, penny-pinching days, trying to get ahead. She remembered when she almost gave up because her father found \$40 she had not put in the bank yet for her and Spider. She had worked overtime for a solid month to make up that money, and Spider had never known. Spider had gotten proud of their bank account and had started giving her \$40 a week to save because he had gotten a good job as a waiter and saved his tips. They were getting ahead. They were going to leave Elm Street behind. Now, Elm Street was the only thing that couldn't be snatched from under her. She hated Elm Street. She hated Jake Adams and she hated every woman who had ever gotten married.

39

THE DOORS were locked at Booker's but no outsiders were coming in anyway. The neighborhood knew the Termites were holding a meeting. Booker sat on a stool behind the counter by the cash register, silent. Thirteen teen-agers, wearing belt-in-the-back velour overcoats, with matching hats resting on their ears, crowded around the first pool table where Jake, Scar, and Scotty were sitting. The guys had on burnt-yellow cashmere sweaters under the coats. A broad, black T was sewn on the front of the sweaters.

"You studs know what this council is all about?" Jake said. "Yeh."

"This is a full-scale war," Jake said. "We're hitting with everything we got. This ain't kid stuff. This is for keeps."

"Like the last scrimmage we had with the Ratz."

"Yeh," Jake said. "The time we got such a terrible rep nobody wanted no part of us any more."

Booker picked his fingernails with an old battered pocket-knife. Booker's mouth was drawn in a tight line. He was tough, he was hard as they come. His boys could whip anybody in the world.

"The arsenal been handed out?" Jake asked Scotty.

"Yeh."

"What we got?"

"Two forty-fives and a thirty-eight. Five bayonets, seven switchblades and two brass knucks. I couldn't locate but two lead pipes. Leo's brother pawned the German Luger and the twenty-two. Cal has an M.1. that his brother shipped home in pieces from overseas, but I left it. I figure it's too hard to hide."

"You figured right," Jake said. "Here's how we'll work it. These other studs make a mistake by bunching up in a scrimmage. They get in each other's way. We're going to divide our force into three parts, so we can get plenty of swinging room. The artillery is going to Scotty, Scar, and me, 'cause we're the veterans and ain't afraid of using it. Me, Scar, and Scotty will have a bayonet apiece too."

You're never out of it, Scar thought. Fugg it.

"There's going to be a knuck or pipe in each group. You say we got two leads, Scotty?"

"Yeh."

"O.K., the extra lead will be in my group, which is going to be the task force. Let's see, we got two bayonets left, and seven switchblades, that's nine. So each group will have three blades. That makes everybody loaded, don't it?"

"Let's see," Scar said. "We got sixteen guys, counting you, me, and Scotty. If we divide the force we got two groups of five and one of six. If the six is the task force, they got two lead pipes, and three blades, not counting the leader's bayonet and artillery. The other two groups got three blades

and a knuck, not counting the leader. That makes everybody covered."

"O.K.," Jake said. "Now here's how we work it. We invade their territory, and scout around till we make contact. But only the task force is going to do the scouting. We're going to string out and walk down the middle of the streets. The rest of you studs are going to stay in a car down at the end of the block. One car on one end the other car on the opposite end. You follow me or I got to draw a diagram?"

"We follow you," Scotty said.

"O.K., we work through the section like that till we make contact. Once the task force connects, the rest of you studs start down the sidewalks. Scar on the right side, and you on the left. If anybody does the shooting it'll be me. You and Scar can't shoot 'cause you might hit one of our boys, you dig? Now pick up. Some of them punks are going to turn chicken and try to beat it out of there. That's when you and Scar start taking potshots, when these guys start running away from the action. You got it?"

"Yeh," Scotty said.

"O.K., the bull session is over. Redistribute the arsenal and let's go to war."

Monk sat in the parked car outside the poolroom waiting. He knew what the locked door at Booker's meant. He had seen it a lot of times, not only here, but other parts of town, even in other cities. It hadn't bothered him then, but it did now. This kind of crap was from nowhere. It was bad for business. You couldn't afford to have one of your pushers in on a deal like this. Monk lit a cigarette and waited. Then he started up in the seat. The T's were coming out. Monk got out of the car and big-shouldered his way through the Termites crowding the sidewalk.

"Hey, Monk," Scotty said. "What's going on?"

"Where's Jake?"

"Right here," Jake said, coming out the door with Scar.

"Hey, Monk," Scar said.

"You studs wait for me on the corner," Jake said, following Monk over to the car.

"Have a cigarette," Monk said in the car and shoved a pack under Jake's nose.

"Thanks," Jake said. "What's up?"

"That's what I want to know," Monk said. "You tell me."

"I don't dig you, Pres."

"Knock it off. You ain't talking to none of them punks. Why the war council?"

"No war council, Monk. Educational program. We got some lessons to teach some studs dumb to classroom work on the corners."

"You're out of it and that's the way you're going to stay. Now look, get it straight. I don't give a damn about whose head the T's cave in long as it don't affect my organization. But you can't be in on it, kid. You know the org can't afford that."

"You remember Spider?" Jake said.

"Yeh."

"He's in the hospital and that makes me in again."

"What happened?"

"The Cootas walked him."

"So now you're putting on your boots?"

"I'm going to do more than walk."

"You're going to stay out of it."

"Like hell I am," Jake said softly, rising to get out of the car.

Monk slammed Jake back down on the seat. "Damn it, you're getting dumber every day. I went along with you in everything else, but this time you're going along with me.

Do you know what's going to happen when you go looking for the Cootas?"

"Yeh, somebody's going to get hurt."

"That's right. Suppose this thing blows real big — "

"Aw, Monk."

"Aw, hell. Suppose it blows so big the newspapers get wind of it. Suppose somebody yaps to the cops and you get taken down on a murder rap maybe. What good would you be to the org notorious? Even if I sprung ya?"

"You're talking crazy."

"You're the one talking crazy. You better grow up. You ain't got time for kid games no more. I got a org to protect and I ain't going to let you mess it up by caving in some Coota heads."

"What the hell you expect me to do, Monk? Go sip on a milkshake and forget about it?"

"Yeh, before you do what you want to do, you damn right."

"I ain't built that way, Monk."

"You think you gotta kick in some teeth."

"That's right."

Monk sighed. "O.K., kid, I'll make you a proposition."

"What kind?"

"You want some heads knocked in. O.K., but you don't have to be in on it."

"I don't dig you, Monk."

"You will. You want the Cootas taught a lesson. O.K., now think who could do the job and get praised for doing it."

"You're crazy. I still don't — wait a minute, Monk, you don't mean — you don't mean the bims?"

"You're growing up."

"But, Monk, could you swing it?"

"What do you think?"

"I dunno. Damn, I dunno."

"You call off your boys. I'll see the Cootas get taught a lesson."

"O.K., Monk, I'll go along with that." He was impressed. Damn, he couldn't have been more impressed if Monk was God. He stood on the curb watching Monk drive away. Damn, he forgot to tell Monk about that Trashwagon guy. The hell with it, it wasn't important. He strolled down to the corner where the T's were waiting. "The war is off," he said. He held up his hand against the protests. "If you guys let me finish, you'll know why."

"We're listening," Scotty said.

"I got connections. You guys know that?"

"Yeh," they murmured, unimpressed.

"I mean big connections. What would you guys think if I told you the Cootas were going to be taken care of by a group even more professional than us?"

"I'd say you was twisted, floating on cloud twenty-nine," Scotty said.

"Yeh, I'm cracking, and I'm facting," Jake said.

"Who's going to take care of these guys for us?" Leo wanted to know.

"I suggest you sit around and wait for the grapevine to bring in the news."

"In the meantime Spider'll be in the hospital thinking the T's is too chicken to look out for his interests," Scotty said.

"Yeh," they echoed.

"Anybody here think Spider ain't a good friend of mine?"

No one said anything.

"Anybody here want to accuse me of being chicken?" Jake said softly, looking at them hard.

Again silence.

"O.K., then you ought to know I wouldn't be calling off the war if I didn't know the Cootas were going to get the hell stomped out of 'em."

The guys started murmuring.

"Let me put it to you studs this-a-way. If in the next two days the Cootas ain't dragging their asses on the ground, I'll go down and do the job myself, and if I chicken out or can't get it done, you can take your feelings out on me, now how that is?"

The guys did not say anything.

"O.K., then, the war's off," Jake said. "Let's quit it, man," he told Scar.

They went into the Zodiac and drank all night. Neither had anything to say. When Scar got home he found Kenny in bed.

"Where you been?" she wanted to know.

"Over to the Zodiac."

"You drunk?"

"Naw."

"I thought we was supposed to have a party here tonight."

"We were, but Spider got stomped. He's in the hospital."

"Who did it?" Kenny said frightened.

"Cootas."

"Scar, you're not going to —"

"They'll be taken care of, but not by us."

"I'm glad," Kenny said, not questioning him any further.

"I've been wondering where you was all night."

"If you had come home, like you usually do, you would have known. I didn't leave here till after six," Scar said.

Kenny looked unhappy. "You know the day is Thanksgiving," she said.

"Yeah, I know it. That's why I was wondering what you got up and went looking for a job for."

"I wasn't looking for no job. I went home," Kenny said.

"Oh," Scar said inquiringly, raising his eyebrows.

"I went to see the kids. Mama's never home on Thanksgiving," Kenny said.

"Oh," Scar said.

40

IN THE ALLEY behind Percy Drive, one of the series of streets making up Callek Place, a once wealthy residential section that had long since turned slums, a slim figure darted through the darkness and rapped on a closed wooden door three times in rapid succession, then paused and rapped lightly two times more. The door opened slightly, cautiously, then swung open. The Barracudas were sitting around a long rough planked table. A dim light above the table cast feeble shadows on the wall. Slits, seated at the right side of the table, glanced away from the knife planted in the center of the table surrounded by blocks of wood representing battle stations and looked at the guy who had entered. "You see him?"

"Yeh, I saw him," the guy said.

"What he say?"

"He said he won his fight two weeks ago. He's a pro pug now."

"Lay off the funny stuff," Slits said, his eyes back on the knife. "What he say?"

"That's what he said, Slits."

"You trying to be funny?"

"Naw, Slits. That's what he said."

Slits turned around to face the messenger. His eyes were

dancing. "I ain't interested in all the preliminaries; I want to know what he had to say about the proposition I offered him."

"That's what I'm talking about, Slits. He said he ain't in no more. He said he was too old. There ain't no Ratz no more, Slits."

"What you mean there ain't no Ratz?"

"There ain't no Ratz seniors. All they got is juniors and midgets."

"That all Perk had to say?"

"Yeh. Frenchie said he wouldn't mind going in, but he was the only one. He said he could get the juniors and midgets on our side."

"That dirty son-of-a-bitch. My brother got a lung chopped off acting as his lieutenant. That yellow bastard."

"I wouldn't call him yellow, Slits. Perk ain't never been yellow."

"You telling me what to say?" Slits asked the messenger.

"Naw, I just —"

"He's yellow," Slits said. "If my brother hadn't been the brains and planned all the scrimmages, you wouldn't have ever even heard of the Ratz. You say Frenchie says we can get the juniors and midgets?"

The messenger nodded.

"O.K., here's —"

"Slits! The bims is busting down the front door," a guy said, rushing into the back room.

"Stash the arsenal."

"There ain't time, Slits. We got to get the hell out of here!"

The Barracudas bolted for the back door leading to the alley. They met blue-coated policemen. Night sticks flew. Three Negro policemen were in the group.

Editorials praising the police force for curbing juvenile delinquency received main column space on the editorial pages. The front pages of the newspapers carried headlines . . . RECENTLY ELECTED POLICE COMMISSIONER CRACKS DOWN ON TEEN-AGE TERROR . . . TEEN-AGE GANG UPBRAIDED . . . POLICE BRING END TO TEEN-AGE CRIME WAVE . . .

Everyone had praise for this newly elected, uncorrupt police force.

Specs occupied a bed down from Spider in the same ward. Jake and Scar walked down to see him. "Let this be a lesson to you, punk," Jake said softly to Specs lying in bed.

"The T's didn't have nothing to do with it," Specs said. "Them bims, them damn dirty bims."

"That's right," Jake said. "Them bims. You want to come back here, start something with the T's again."

"Let me alone," Specs said, the tears welling. "Let me alone!"

Jake motioned to Scar. They walked away. Specs was hurting, man, was he hurting.

Spider did not seem to be doing so good. He tried to fool Jake and Scar by joking about everything. Evelyn sat quietly not saying anything.

"The Barracudas won't be bothering nobody no more," Jake said, "mainly because there ain't no Barracudas no more."

"Yeh, I heard about the bims splattering them," Spider said.

"Who you think put the bims on their tail?" Jake said, winking at Spider.

"You, man?"

"He's got connections," Scar said.

"Jim, Pres! You swing a mean ax," Spider said.

"Nobody gets away goofing with Jake Adams' boys; keep it under you hat, man."

"You know me," Spider said.

"When they going to let you unhorse that bed, man?" Scar said.

Spider glanced at Evelyn. He brought his large hands together, making a vise and cracking his fingers. "I'll be out pretty soon," he said indifferently.

"That's right," Evelyn said bitterly.

"What's eating your broad, man?" Jake said.

"Aw — she's tired. She put in a pretty tough day at the store. Why don't you take her home so she can get some rest? She spends all her evenings over here with me."

"But, Bert."

"Go ahead, Evelyn," Spider blurted. "I'll see you studs later, man. You come by and sit in with me tomorrow, huh, Evelyn?" Spider said softly.

Evelyn hesitated.

"Take her home, will you, fellas? I'm sleepy," Spider said.

In the car Evelyn had nothing to say. She sat glumly between Scar and Jake.

"What do you think?" Jake said.

"He didn't look so good," Scar admitted.

"How's he doing?" Jake asked Evelyn. "You see him more than us."

"He's doing fine, just fine," Evelyn snapped.

"Man, what did I say wrong?" Jake asked Scar.

"Beats me!"

They let it ride until Evelyn got out of the car.

"Say, Evelyn, we're still friends, ain't we?" Jake said.

"If Bert hadn't been your friend, he wouldn't have gotten hurt," Evelyn said.

"Jim, baby, I didn't have nothing to do with it."

"You started it," Evelyn said.

"They started it, I finished it," Jake said. "I fixed it so they ain't going to never bother nobody else."

"You're good at fixing things, aren't you, Jake?"

"Yeh, at times."

"You want to fix everything for Spider, is that it?"

"I did."

"Did you? Me and Bert were getting married next month. He had a good job and we had a little money put away. Now he's going to be crippled for life. Can you fix that, Jake?" She ran into the house leaving Jake and Scar staring.

"So that's what's wrong with the stud," Jake said softly as if he was talking to himself.

"Damn, that's a tough break," Scar said.

"Yeh, tough." His hands felt clammy on the steering wheel, his head ten miles above the rest of his body. He got out a stick of pod and lit it, right there in front of Scar.

"I thought you steered away from the mess," Scar said.

Jake sucked it in, got lost on the burning drag.

41

SPIDER GOT OUT of the hospital one week after Jake went back to school. Scar went over to Spider's house to see him. Two of Spider's brothers, who were supposed to be in school, were playing blackjack on the kitchen table. They nodded to Scar. The four-room apartment was crowded with the possessions of seven children and two adults. Spider seemed pretty cheerful. Scar couldn't think of anything to say, seeing Spider on crutches like that. He did not stay long. He went

over on Wisconsin Avenue looking for Maxine. He was feeling pretty low. He didn't know what he would have to let himself in for going to see Slim. He knew. But, he didn't.

Maxine's place was deserted. There was a large "For Rent" sign in the window. He went into the room and looked the place over. The closets were empty. The huge shabby bed was naked. The vanity and two wooden chairs were covered with dust. Scar looked at himself in the dusty mirror over the vanity. Man, he looked strung-out. He wrote his name in the dust on the vanity. Then he noticed the small photograph in the corner of the mirror. It was a picture of Jake and Maxine, their heads together, smiling broadly. "The eternal two" was printed on the bottom of the photograph in blue ink. He looked at the happy smile on Maxine's face. He brushed the dust from the photograph and put it in his pocket. Then, all at once, he had to get out of there. He closed the door slowly behind him.

He knocked on the door across the hall. A dark, old woman peered out through the partially open door. She had a purple bandanna wrapped around her head.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you knew where the girl that used to live here moved to?"

"I don't know and I don't care!"

"Ma'am?"

"You talking 'bout the gal that stayed over there?" The old woman pointed to the room Scar had come out of. "The one who used to come in drunk all the time, humph! In her condition too. That little slut used to bring men in all hours of the night and make so much racket couldn't none of us get no sleep."

"How long has she been gone?" Scar wanted to know.

" 'Bout three weeks. Good riddance too."

"You don't know where she went?"

"I told you I didn't. A man come and got her things 'bout three weeks ago. I ain't got time to stand here talking to you, I got work to do. You one of her men? Humph! Must not think much of you, going off to live with some other man and not telling you 'bout it." The old woman grinned derisively at Scar. Then the door closed.

He went over to Booker's. He was tore up. If the cops saw him now he was sure to get busted. He didn't care.

"Hey, Scar, Jake sure knew what he was doing, didn't he?" Scotty said.

"Yeh."

Scotty made a cross-corner shot to sink the eight ball. "You better watch out, Pres," he said laughing. "I'm getting good as you."

"Man, your boy's sure got connections," Leo said.

"Yeh."

"When Spider getting out of the hospital?"

"He got out last night."

"Good," Scotty said. "Hey, Booker! Rack the damn balls, will ya?"

"Jake's the toughest all right," Booker said, coming over to the table.

"Yeh," Scar said. "Yeh."

2 THE HOLLOW ECHO

M

AXINE BLINKED her eyes open. At first she could not remember, then it all came back. The pain, the screams, the long, long wait for the ambulance. What had they done to her? She looked around the room, but saw only other women in rows of beds like hers. Russell? she said, but no sound came out. She could not feel the tongue in her mouth. She was not certain how her tongue was supposed to feel, but she knew she was supposed to feel it.

A prissy, stiff-dressed nurse came in carrying a tray filled with needles and medicine. She came directly to Maxine. "How are you feeling?" she said.

"O.K., I guess," Maxine said, surprised to hear the words come out. She frowned at the sound of her voice. Her voice sounded coarse, ugly, as if she were speaking with feelings instead of words.

"I'll send the doctor in to see you," the nurse said.

Maxine murmured something, her eyes heavy again. When she woke up the doctor was standing at the foot of her bed watching her.

"I'm delighted to see you resting so well," the doctor said. He smiled at her. The room was a mirror of flashing teeth.

"How long will I be here, Doctor?" Maxine said, ashamed of her voice.

"We should be able to let you go home in a few weeks, if you promise to take it easy for a while."

"Weeks?"

The doctor shook his head.

"But no one nowadays stays over a week — "

"We had a tough time with you, but — "

"How tough? — Doc — everything was all right, wasn't it?"

"You're going to be fine — " He was stopped by the eternal question in her eyes. The question that could neither be answered, nor avoided. He did as he always did in such cases, he hedged, he fumbled, he retreated and in that instance Maxine knew. "We did everything we could, you must rest. I shall have your visitor come and see you later — "

"I have a visitor?" Maxine said dryly.

The doctor nodded.

"Russell?"

Again the nod.

"Could I please see him, Doctor?" she said, her voice tight and hard.

The doctor nodded and left the ward. A few minutes later a fat, dark, half-bald man in a rust-colored suit came in.

"The doc say I can't stay but a few minutes," the man said.

"Hi," Maxine said. Her eyes felt heavy, but she kept them open.

"Howya feel?"

"All right, I guess. I feel a hundred pounds lighter and heavier all at the same time, you know what I mean, Russell?"

"Sure. The doc say you be out in a few weeks."

"Yeh," Maxine said.

"Well, I guess I got to go. I'll tell you 'bout things when you get better."

"You can tell me now," Maxine said.

"Aw, we'll talk about it later."

"It was nice of you to take care of me all that time. You're a nice guy, Russell."

"Yeh, that's me."

"I'm not going to welch. You're going to make me a feature dancer at the Paradise, aren't you, Russell?"

"Yeh, your name in neon, a group behind you, spotlights, the whole works," Russell said.

Maxine laughed and suddenly her voice was not nasty any more. She was still laughing when Russell left. Then she turned her face into the pillow. She should be out of it by now. She should be hard, sophisticated like everyone said she was. Her heart was hard as a rock, wasn't that what Russell said? Yeh. It was hard all right. It was so heavy it was dragging along her shoes and she kept stepping on it. She rang for the nurse. A male hospital attendant answered the buzzer and stood shifting around, waiting for her to say something.

"Could you get me some supplies so I can write a letter?"

"Well, lady, gee I dunno," the large, baby-faced attendant said.

"I'll pay for it later. You can trust me," Maxine said.

The attendant still hesitated.

"I'll see that you get a dollar tip, soon as Russell comes back," Maxine said.

"Russell?"

"The guy with the bald eagle haircut that just left."

"Well — O.K.," the attendant said.

The attendant brought back the supplies and Maxine wrote Jake a long letter. She had trouble expressing herself the way she wanted to in the letter. She rewrote the letter five times before she was satisfied. Then she went to sleep.

2

SPIDER MADE IT all the way down the steps of the hallway where he lived. He made it on crutches by himself. He did not want help from anyone, ever. Ice was on the sidewalk so he took it easy, not that he could go very fast anyway, but he sure didn't want to kick up any heels on that ice. Course, maybe he should. Maybe if he fell down it would knock his spine back in place. Spider laughed. It was cold, the wind cut into his gloveless fingers gripping the crutches. He decided to get some gloves before he came back home. "Hey, taxi!" Spider called. "To the Zodiac," he told the driver. "Stay inside, man, I can make it." When the driver pulled up in front of the Zodiac, Spider gave him a dollar. "Keep the change," he said.

"Thanks, bro," the driver said.

Spider leaned his weight on the door leading into the bar and went inside. "Hey, Charlie."

"Hey, Spider. How you making it?" the bartender said.

"Everything's crazy," Spider said. He hobbled on back to the back room.

"Hi, kid," the stone-faced houseman said.

"How's tricks?"

"Everything's dead right now," the houseman said.

"I dig," Spider said.

"Anything, I can do for you, kid?"

"I guess that little hype we had is all blown over."

"Naw, kid. You'll get so you can stand them crutches up on one end and hit all night. You can still make some bread," the houseman said.

Spider said, "Naw, Carl, that's all over. I been doing a lot of thinking, wasn't much else I could do laying up in that hospital bed."

"I'm hearing ya," the houseman said.

"That hype couldn't last forever. Sooner or later somebody was gonna get wise. Then I would of had to take my business elsewhere."

"I don't know 'bout that," the houseman said.

Spider shook his head. "It would of happened sometime. I was getting ready to get married before I got wasted. That kind of changed things."

The houseman nodded.

"I don't mean I ain't still thinking about getting married, but I did a lot of thinking and I figure a married stud needs something steady, you know what I mean, Carl?"

"Yeh, I'm viewing you," the houseman said.

"I was sort of wondering — "

"I can fix you up," the houseman said.

"I don't wanna impose — "

"I need somebody to help run the game," the houseman said. He winked at Spider. "I'm getting old."

"Gee, thanks Carl, you're a life rescuer, man."

It was the first time Spider ever remembered seeing the houseman smile. "There's a couple of tricks you got to pick up on like — Hell, kid, the way you set up that dice deal, you shouldn't have no trouble picking up on this routine."

You can't keep a good man down, Spider was thinking in the cab on the way over to Evelyn's. He was feeling good.

He took Evelyn out for dinner. They sat quietly in Pollard's, a high-class Negro-owned restaurant which featured fancily prepared food, expensive prices, and slow service. Spider felt big, as big as a mountain. He rubbed his silver cuff links on the linen napkin beside his silverware.

"You seem to be in a good mood," Evelyn said.

"I should be. I got a job, a good one. A damn good one."

"Spider, you're kidding?"

"Is a bear?"

Evelyn smiled for the first time in weeks. "Tell me about it," she said excitedly.

"Here comes the chow," Spider said. "I'll tell you about it after we peck."

"Oh, Bert, this is like old times."

"Yeh," Spider agreed. "Almost." In the old days he had not even thought about getting a job.

A light-brown-skinned waitress served them steaks still sizzling on the platter. Spider ordered dinner wine from the bar in back of the restaurant. He wanted everything right for his girl. He just hoped she would always think of him just as Spider and not crippled Spider. He brought his fist down on the table, hard!

"What's the matter, Bert?"

"Nothing," Spider said. "Nothing, forget it."

After dinner they sat around smoking and sipping the remaining half of the bottle of wine.

"Bert, you're miles away somewhere."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"I was just thinking."

Evelyn reached for his hand. "Tell me about your job," she said.

"Not much to tell."

"Where is it?"

"At the Zodiac."

"Zodiac?"

"Yeh, Zodiac, that's what I said."

"Doing what?" Evelyn said, her hand tightening around Spider's.

"Houseman for the game in the back."

"Oh," Evelyn said.

"I'll make at least seventy-five stones every week."

"Oh."

"Some weeks I might even get up to a hundred."

"Oh."

"Is that all you got to say, just 'oh'!"

"You're not gambling, are you, Bert?"

"Housemen don't gamble, they just run the game."

"Oh."

"I just thought you might like to know I had a job."

"I am glad, Bert," Evelyn said, a lump in her throat. "I think it's a swell job. I do, I mean it."

"You still want to marry me? You don't have to, you know."

"Yes," Evelyn said.

"Yes, what?"

"Just yes, Bert. That's all."

"When?"

"Tonight."

"Let's wait until tomorrow. We can't get no blood test tonight."

"We have to wait three days after the blood test before we can get married."

"I can wait that long," Spider said.

WHEN JAKE AND ARMENTA came home for the Christmas holidays, Spider and Evelyn were married. Jake found Scar and went around to see Spider and Evelyn as soon as he got in the city. They were living on Thirteenth Street not far from Scar. Jake liked the apartment, it was modernistic and clean. Spider had beer in the icebox. They drank in silence. Spider wanted to know about Armenta and Jake told him she had come home on the train so he had not seen her. There did not seem to be anything else to talk about. They looked at each other nervously. Jake and Scar did not stay long. They said they would get together sometime during the week and celebrate Spider's getting married, but they knew they wouldn't. Things had changed, they weren't ever going to be the same. Spider had dropped out of the crowd.

Jake declined the invitation to go out with Scar and Kenny on Christmas Eve. He spent the night in a crowded bar down on Third and Welch where he was not likely to run into any of his friends.

Out north, where Armenta lived, carollers made the neighborhood melodious with Christmas songs. The blocks in the district were dressed up with sparkling Christmas tree lights strung over porches, shrubbery, and windows. Snow fell on the lights and became a dyed mixture of red, yellow, blue, orange, and purple, soft, splotchy softness. The carollers left their footprints in the ankle-deep snow covering the stiff grass lawns. Laughter floated from basement windows where people welcomed in the holidays with bottled spirits in rathskellers. It was tolling church bells and the Santa Claus ditty and the barking chest cold with the feverish brow.

At the Arnez house Mr. Arnez and his wife finished deco-

rating with evergreen in the living room while their sullen daughter stared listlessly at the wallpaper.

"The girls should be getting here any minute now," Mr. Arnez said.

"Yes," Mrs. Arnez laughed. "I don't feel too bad with them living so far away, knowing they'll be home for Christmas."

"Too bad Wilma won't be here."

"Well, Henry, you didn't really expect her to come all the way from Africa just to be home for Christmas —"

"No, no, I suppose not," Henry Arnez said wistfully. "It would have been nice though."

Mrs. Arnez smiled. "Little Jimmy and Bertha will be seven years old next year. It doesn't seem like it, does it? Time flies."

"I'm glad Wilma doesn't have any children yet. Africa's no place to bring them up."

"Now Henry."

"What's the matter with your youngest? She hasn't said a word all night."

"I guess she still wants to go out, Henry," Mrs. Arnez said.

"Phaspt, who ever heard of anyone going out on Christmas Eve?"

"It seems to be a modern idea. I must admit I don't think much of it," Mrs. Arnez said.

"She's got to get those kind of ideas out of her head," Henry Arnez said. "She —"

Armenta got up and went out of the room.

"Hey, where you going?" Mr. Arnez said.

"I don't feel good," Armenta said.

"Come on back in here and stop that foolishness. Armenta, you hear me —"

"Leave her alone, Henry," Mrs. Arnez said.

In her room Armenta locked the door, undressed, and got

in bed. She took out the small portable record player, last year's Christmas present from her parents and filled it with forty-five rpms. Christmas was for kids. She would never believe in Santa Claus again. She wouldn't believe in anything. Everyone wanted to tear the world apart. No one wanted to put it together. Religion was a big joke. Everything her parents had taught her was a joke. Her parents had always taught her to be neighborly to everyone, but her father had taken Jake from her. Her parents had also taught her to turn the other cheek. It seemed she had been doing that all her life. Her parents were prejudiced, she realized dully. Her father had always told her how prejudiced white people were, but Armenta realized Negroes were prejudiced too. Her old man was a snob and she had to pay for it. She wondered if there was really a God. Her biological science course had confused her. Jake wasn't confused by that biological science stuff. Jake laughed about it. She felt guilty thinking about Jake. Jake didn't think she liked him any more because she had not gone back with him instead of taking the train. She tried to stay away from him the way her father had wanted her to at school, but they had gotten back together, not like it used to be though. Her father had started making her see things about Jake she had never seen before. She knew he wasn't working, yet he always had money. She hated her father for making her find faults in Jake. Jake was waiting for her. He said if she didn't come it would prove she did not care anything about him. She would go to see him. She would slip off and — She was a coward, but she would explain it to Jake, she would tell him everything.

Jake spent ten dollars over the bar trying to get drunk. He played Eckstine's "Body and Soul" on the jukebox so often

that people became tired of hearing it. He waited, he spent Christmas Eve waiting, and he was still there when the doors had closed for the night and they started sweeping up the floor. He didn't feel bad, he couldn't feel sorry for himself. He never felt sorry for a sucker.

If someone had asked him how he spent the holidays he would have had a hard time filling in the details. He stayed gassed on pod and alcohol. He and Scar stayed tore up. They never had such a crazy time in all their lives.

4

EVELYN QUIT WORKING right after New Year's and Kenny spent a lot of time over there. She thought maybe she could get Evelyn's job, but Evelyn told her they had too many people ahead of her on the list who wanted to work and that she could not put in a good word for Kenny because they got mad at her for quitting.

Kenny admired Evelyn's apartment. She thought it was real pretty.

"It's nice, I hope we can keep it. It costs eighty a month and with me not working —"

"I thought Bert had a good job?"

"He made a hundred last week, but — gee, Kenny, I'm worried. You know he doesn't even have to pay income taxes 'cause gambling is against the law."

"Is that right? Gee that's a break. Scar don't pay none neither."

"How's Scar?" Evelyn asked. "I think he thinks I'm mad at him."

"Is that what's wrong with him? He stays drunk all the

time, specially when Jake was here. Scar didn't use to be like that."

"No, he didn't," Evelyn agreed.

"He still makes a lot of money. He says he makes it shooting pool, but he ain't as good as he used to be."

"Kenny, you think you're doing the right thing? Staying with him, I mean. I wouldn't be asking if we wasn't friends, but — well, you know."

"You think I'm doing wrong, Evelyn? I can't find no job."

"I — well forget I said anything, huh?"

"I don't think Armenta thinks it's right. I ain't seen her since she went off to school," Kenny said.

"None of us have. I hear she's having trouble at home. Jake said something about it once."

"Is that what it is? That's too bad, I know how that is," Kenny said.

"I wish Bert had some other kind of job, but I guess it ain't much else he can do. I guess I'm lucky he's got that, but I hate to think of him around all that gambling. We're going to have a baby, you know?"

"No," Kenny said. "That's wonderful."

"Yes. Spider made me quit working when I told him about it. I wish I hadn't. I could have worked at least four more months."

"Well, I guess he figures he's making enough to take care of you."

"That's what he said. He said he was making enough to take care of two or three babies and me. He's so proud of that."

"I guess he is. I'm glad you're getting on so well."

"We ain't had a bit of trouble," Evelyn said.

Over in the Zodiac, in the back room, Spider sat in a chair at the end of the dice table. His face was blank, as somber

as Carl's. The table was crowded. A lot of people Spider had won money from were in the game. The guy shooting threw craps. "Damn," he said. Then his face wrinkled into a grin. "You're poison, Pres," he told Spider. "Even on that end of the table you come up winning my money." Spider shrugged. He took the money the shooter had placed on the table to cover his bet. "Try your luck with a new pair," Spider said, changing dice for the shooter.

The shooter winked at Spider. He threw the dice, caught a point, and made it on the next two tries. He caught seven three times in a row before he missed. "Well, you can't have all the luck," the shooter said. The dice traveled the table. Over in the far corner the houseman ran the Blackjack game. In front of him was a metal box filled with money to pay off the winners. The box was getting chocked. No one was winning.

Spider kept the dice moving. Man, if he didn't have to cut Carl in on the profits he would really be whaling. Course, he wasn't complaining. Carl didn't split any of his share of the Blackjack take though. But, what the hell, it should be like that; Carl kept everything running. He bet Carl made more money than the club did in the back room. Man, oh man, and he had thought he was smart setting up that little deal with Carl, that crooked dice hype, wasn't that something? He wondered how Evelyn was doing. He hoped she was feeling all right having a baby and all. She thought she had to work, wasn't that a joke? He knew she wouldn't go for how the game was run if she knew, but the hell with that. So Carl had shown him how to make the guys throw craps every now and then so the houseman would get the shooter's bread. What the hell, she didn't think he could make \$75 a week, working a split-shift eight-hour day doing nothing, did she?

SCHOOL LET OUT the twenty-first of January. Jake packed everything. He wasn't coming back two weeks from now to start the second semester. He hadn't said anything to Armenta since school had started again after the holidays. A few times, when he saw her in the coffee shop, she had started to say something, but she never did. A broad's a broad — He had enough of that true-blue stuff. Look what had happened. Maybe Monk was right. He didn't have no business messing with her in the first place. He felt as strung-out as a squadron of B-36's, but he bet didn't nobody know it but him. He carried the two full suitcases out of the basement of a house down at the foot of the hill from the university and dumped them into the trunk of the Dynaflo. School had been kind of fun for a while, but what the hell, he wasn't cut out for that stuff anyhow. He unfastened the room keys from his key chain and went up the stairs of the porch and knocked on the front door.

"Here's your keys, Mr. Koonce, I'm shoving off now."

"Still won't change your mind 'bout coming back next semester, huh?"

"Naw, I'm afraid not, Mr. Koonce," Jake said smiling.

"You didn't flunk no courses?"

"Naw. The only C I got was in English. I got a C-minus in that," Jake admitted. "I can't get the hang of that stuff."

"I knowed you was pretty smart all the time, otherwise I don't reckon that pretty girl of yours would have been fooling round you. She got a scholarship, didn't she?"

"For next year."

"Well, that's fine. I haven't seen her around here since you all came back from the holidays."

"She's around," Jake said.

"Well, son, you take it easy. I wish you a lot of success in whatever you decide to do, hear?"

"Thanks," Jake said.

He was starting to pull off when he saw the small familiar figure coming down the hill. He sat tight in the car and waited.

"Jake, are you about to leave without getting my bags?"

"For what?" Jake said.

"I'm going back with you."

On the highway, starting on the three-hundred-mile trip, Jake drove in silence.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"No."

"Slow down then," Armenta said. "I'm not anxious to get home."

After the first hundred miles Armenta wanted to stop at one of the roadside inns for a drink. The place was rather rundown and lonely, but Armenta made it cozy by snuggling up to Jake in the booth. Armenta drank a couple of shots of scotch, but Jake just took a few beers. They drank in silence. They remained that way back in the car. She put her head on his shoulder, crowding him at the wheel with all the cars zooming by, but he didn't mind. When they finally approached the city Armenta began to shift nervously.

"Jake?"

"Yeh."

"Are you in a hurry to get home?"

"Not particularly."

Armenta looked out the window at the scenery, which was mainly billboards as far as she could see leading into the city. "Let's not go home, Jake, I mean not until tomorrow, maybe."

"Your folks'll be looking for you," Jake said dryly.

"Not until tomorrow. They're not expecting me before then. Let's — " She looked at him and blushed. "Let's stay at one of those — "

"Motels?"

"Damn right. Let's stay at one of them all night!" Armenta said.

They stopped at the only interracial motel outside the city limits. The motel had few Negro visitors. It was a very expensive place. After having the baggage put away they went around to the main section of the sprawling motel into the restaurant. They ate in silence, Armenta hurriedly, Jake taking his time. Then they went into the bar. The bar was called the Purple Room. The rug, curtains, and upholstery were deep velvet. Lights glowing like a fading sunset were diffused from the walls and ceiling. Each table had candles melting over containers that looked like ancient wine bottles. A pianist, bass fiddler, and violinist played warm, sentimental music on a raised platform. Occasionally the violinist strolled among the customers playing songs requested from the tables. The violinist stopped before Jake and Armenta and asked them what they wanted to hear. Armenta felt self-conscious because everyone had requested songs from operas or symphonies.

"Will you play 'Body and Soul'?" Jake said. "It's our favorite song."

The violinist strung up the tune on the violin, playing with fire and magnitude. Jake was overwhelmed. It sounded like concert music. His stomach seemed filled with music. He felt Armenta's hand on his. To his surprise he saw the lashes over her eyes betray her with moisture. The violinist tipped his instrument to them and strolled over to another customer. They sat in the room listening to the music until it closed.

In the room Armenta turned off the light and they undressed in the dark. He found her in bed lying on her stomach and ran his fingers over her back. She turned to him shivering and made him wait, teasing him with soft naked limbs, nipples brushing, and then moaned and squirmed and twisted against exerted pressure. They did not get much sleep.

That afternoon they left the motel. Armenta knew this was the only way it could be. Someone stronger than she would rebel, but not her, never Armenta Arnez. She did not know how to tell Jake. She thought of how she had not let Jake use contraceptives those months at school, hoping she would become pregnant, but even mother nature seemed to be on her father's side. "Jake?"

"Huh?"

"You still think I don't go for you?"

He pulled her to him.

"I'm sorry about, about everything, Jake."

"What for? Everything's all right now."

Armenta was silent until Jake had almost reached her house. "Stop here," she said. "I was trying to tell you everything's over, that's what I was trying to tell you all along."

Jake put on brakes fast. "Is that why you went to all the trouble of last night, the buildup for the big letdown?"

"No, you know that's not true, Jake."

"Then why —"

"Goodbye, Jake."

"You're kidding?"

"No." She got out of the car with her suitcases. "Please don't follow me," she said.

He had the haunting feeling he would never see her again.

SCAR PLACED some discs on the player he had bought Kenny for Christmas. He was glad Kenny was gone looking for a job or wherever she had gone. Kenny liked boogie-joogie and Scar was not in the mood for digging corn bread. He played a scrib of the Duke digging what B could do on "Sophisticated Lady." He had heard it a few minutes ago in the record shop and bought it and "Manteca" by Diz. "Sophisticated Lady" turned out to be real tough. Scar fed his habit and floated. If he didn't straighten up soon, man, he was going to get wasted. He was hung-up all afternoon, but he was straight when Kenny came home. "Hi, baby," he said. "Dig this crazy jam." He closed his eyes and started "Sophisticated Lady" again.

"You drunk?"

"Yeh, on music."

"I wish you hadn't changed so, Scar," Kenny said ruefully. She crossed hesitantly over to the sofa where Scar was lying and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "I thought you'd want to know I got a job, sort of."

Scar opened his eyes and sat up slowly. "You have?" he said not sounding happy about it.

"Ain't you glad for me, Scar? Now I won't have to live with you no more."

"Yeh. Sure, baby. I'm glad for you," Scar said flatly.

"I guess I better pack. I leave for Sweetport tomorrow."

"You got a hang-over in Sweetport?"

"I enlisted in the WAC's. We leave for training camp tomorrow."

Scar said nothing, his face said nothing, his whole body had nothing to say.

"Well, I better pack — "

Scar closed his eyes. "Sophisticated Lady" drowned communication. Kenny stood by Scar awkwardly not knowing what to do. "You was nice to me, Alonzo. I ain't never had nobody that nice to me before."

Scar opened his eyes. The thought of Kenny leaving hit him like a day without the needle. "I wasn't nice to you, Kenny."

"Yes, you was. Even in these last months when you —" She turned away from him.

Scar sat up slowly and put his hands around her waist. "You take it easy — Kenny. We'll always —"

She covered his hands with hers. "I know," she said. Whoever said this broad was dumb? Scar felt a lump in his throat. He pulled her gently down on the sofa with him. "Sophisticated Lady" played over and over —

Out on Welch Street Jake paced the familiar blocks. He had no trouble getting Monk to switch him back to his old spot and send Joe back to J City. Now, after talking to Monk, Jake did not know what to do with the rest of the night. The praise from the guys in the poolroom still buzzed in his ears. They thought he could handle anything. Not long ago he thought so too. He wanted to see Scar but wasn't up to looking at what Scar had gone to lately. He made himself go into the back room of the Zodiac. Spider winked at him from his seat at the end of the crap table. He stood by Spider a while hanging around watching the game. After a while he waved to Spider and walked out into the bar. He ordered double shots of scotch and drank mechanically. Down on the other end of the bar Benbow nodded coolly. Benbow had his arm around a woman next to him. "I see your babe's hit the big time," he said.

"Who?" Jake said.

"Maxine, you know?" Benbow drew a figure with his hands, smiling at Jake.

"Oh, yeh," Jake said. He walked over to the jukebox and spent a quarter on Bird, Pres, and Diz. Then he dropped another nickel in the machine for "Body and Soul." The place started to get noisy as the barhops started coming in. A slim woman, dressed in red, wriggled in the door and skimped down the aisle looking the bar over. She stopped by Jake and pushed his hat over his eyes. "Hi, Kit. How's tricks?" Jake said.

"Ain't nothing shaking but the leaves on the trees," the woman said disgustedly. "And they wouldn't be shaking if it wasn't for the breeze." She laughed, bounced away and assumed a provocative wide-legged stance with one elbow resting on the jukebox.

The guy next to Jake at the bar nudged him. "That one of yourn?" he said knowingly.

"I knew her in high school."

"Damn, you mean they let whores go to school?"

"She says her ambition was to be a schoolteacher, in the yearbook," Jake said.

"Where she going to teach classes at, on the corners?"

"It's a free world," Jake said.

"If you got a white face," the man said, laughing and slapping Jake on his back. "Say-Charlie-bring-my-boy-a-drink," the man said, pointing to Jake.

"No, thanks," Jake said, slapping the man back. "Buy Kit one. She might give it to you for nothing."

"What's eating that cat?" The guy spread his hands. "All I did was —" He stopped in embarrassment. No one was listening.

Jake went around to the bowling alley part of the Zodiac. He sat down on the last seat of one of the long rows of seats

connected together. The seven bowling lanes were filled with players. Tonight was league night and the seven teams in multi-colored uniforms were going at each other. The bowling balls blasted into the pins and agitated players yelled above the din cursing encouragements at each other. Women hung around in turtleneck sweaters, their slack-covered legs dangling over seats, mouths stuffed with hot dogs, hands slippery on cold beer bottles. The air seemed heavy like it wanted to make you sneeze. Caldonia switched in with a man hanging on his arm. Caldonia needed a shave. Jake went into the toilet with the cracked toilet and face bowls and the dirty four-letter rhymes written on the toilet walls. He closed the door in front of one of the toilet bowls and lit a stick. He dropped the match into the yellow-stained toilet bowl, leaned back against the wall, took a long drag, swallowed, and watched the ashless glow. The toilet was a merry-go-round.

Over at Scar's, at two minutes after eight, the phone rang.

"Scar, have you seen Jake?"

"Naw. Who is this, Armenta?"

"Yes. You haven't seen him?"

"Naw. Is he back in town?"

"We got in today. I've got to get in touch with him."

"You try his house?"

"You know that's the first place I called. I guess I should have known he wouldn't be home."

"Well he's not here."

"Scar, find him for me. You know where to look. I don't know where to look for — " She faltered.

"Well, damn, I — "

"Please Scar. Tell him to call as soon as you find him, no matter what time it is, will you?"

"It's like that, huh?"

"Yes."

"O.K., I'll find him for you," Scar said.

"Who was that?" Kenny wanted to know.

"Armenta. I got to go find Jake," Scar said.

Outside of the Zodiac, Jake breathed deeply in the cold air. He cupped his hands and lit a cigarette against the wind. He supposed he could go to some of the other joints, but what the hell, a bar was a bar. He could stay in the Zodiac if that was all he was going to do.

"Hey, Jake!"

Jake looked around and saw a long lanky figure in a sailor uniform beckoning to him from across the street. Well, I'll be damn. He flipped the match out into the surging traffic and followed it.

"Say man, how you gonna sound?" They laughed at each other.

"How long you been a swabbie, Ed?" Jake had to look up. "Damn, when you start wearing stilts?" Jake said.

"I been in ever since a week after we graduated."

"Navy do that to everybody?" Jake said measuring Ed's six-foot-three inches of lanky frame.

White teeth flashed in Ed's handsome face. "Dig the crazy mop, man," Ed said taking the navy-blue winter dress cap off his head and bowing so Jake could get a good look at the glossy waves pushed up pompadour fashion.

"Jim!" Jake said. "Where you get a burn like that?"

"New York, man. That's where I'm stationed."

"It don't look like a conk."

"It ain't. It's a marcel, latest thing out. Better join the Navy, man. I was already pretty 'fore I went in. Now I'm tall, dark, and handsome, ha-ha."

Ed hadn't changed much, except for height, Jake was thinking. They had some good times in high school. Ed's hair didn't gas him. It looked artificial. But he had to admit it looked a hell of a lot better than a conk. "You on leave?"

"Yeah. I got five more days to spend in this hick town. Man, you oughta go to New York. Ain't no other city like it in the whole world. Come on an see my short. I'm parked down the way."

"That what they call cars in New York?"

"Yeh, Pres. Where you been? Don't tell me you goin' turn square on me? Man, this hick town is got a bad influence. What you doing now?"

"This and that."

"Man, you looking prosperous."

"I ain't complaining."

"I got something in the short a knock your eyes out," Ed said. Ed whirled around to get a better look at the figure that had jostled him as they passed by. "What in hell is that?"

Jake laughed. "Caldonia? He thinks every day is Halloween."

"This is me," Ed pointed to a 1946 maroon Chevy. "Pick up on the happenings. They're ready to go, drunk as hell. I was hoping I'd run into somebody wasn't square that could take one of 'em off my hands."

"Well, I'll be damn," Jake said. "Where you pick them up?"

"All right, huh, man? I ran into 'em across town."

"They got those kind of bars over there?"

"Hell, naw. This is a square-assed town. It's all white over there, man."

"Then, how in hell — "

Ed winked. "That comes from being on the corners of the big city. Get in, man."

"No thanks."

"What's wrong, man? You chicken?"

"Naw, I ain't chicken."

"Man, don't tell me that you going to turn out square after all these years? A little piece of white ass ain't going to kill you."

Jake looked at the stringy hair, the smeared make-up, the dowdy clothes, the skinny frames. "That's just it, they don't kill me."

"Man, they white."

"I don't give a damn."

"A hard rod ain't never had no conscience."

"Maybe not," Jake said. "But I have." Jake left Ed standing there. "See you around," he said. He went down to Molly's to eat a few sandwiches and drink some coffee. That was where Scar found him.

"Spider told me you had been by the Zodiac," Scar said.

"Just left there not long ago," Jake said. "How you doing?"

"I'm making it," Scar said.

"I just got in this evening."

"Yeh, I know. Armenta told me."

"Armenta?"

"Yeh. She's looking for you, wants you to call her."

"Get off it, cat."

"No joke, that's what she said. She sent me out looking for you."

"Aw, she's full of feces."

"Feces?"

"Word I learned in college," Jake said. "Only one I appreciated."

"Well, she said to call her no matter what time of night it was."

"The hell with it."

"What's wrong, man?"

"I'm tired of her goofing over me," Jake said quietly. "She thinks all she had to do is snap her fingers and she can turn me on and off like water."

"She don't think that," Scar said.

"How you know? You're on the outside looking in."

"Lots of times you can see better on the outside."

"Well, she's my ole lady. I'm the one she's shacking with. You don't know her as good as me," Jake said.

"I know her," Scar said.

Jake looked up from the muddy coffee at Scar. "What you mean by that?"

"Oh nothing," Scar shrugged. "You better call her. She sounded like it was real important."

"She ought to buy some toys if she wants to play with something. Let's go see what's happening at the Paradise."

Scar stared at Jake.

"Come on, man. You looking at me like I'm drunk or something. I ain't, but I will be before the night's over."

"If you don't call that girl you going to wish the night was over before you was drunk," Scar said.

Jake lit another cigarette gangster style outside of Molly's and flipped the match with his thumb and middle finger so that it sailed halfway into the street before the wind caught it and blew it back toward the curb. Scar wanted to get back to the apartment with Kenny, but he did not want to leave Jake until he had called Armenta. "Why don't you call the girl, man?"

"She told me all she had to say."

"Man."

"Fugg it," Jake said.

"There's a booth in the Zodiac," Scar said as they ap-

proached the bar. "Jake." Scar grabbed Jake by the arm.

"Goddammit, Scar, leave me alone. What you got to do with it?" Jake said quietly.

"Goddammit, you're going to call that girl. I didn't get out of bed and come all the way around here for nothing."

"What the hell you doing in bed?"

"Kenny's leaving tomorrow for the WAC's if it's any of your damn business. Why don't you take care of your own and call Armenta?"

"Kenny joining the WAC?"

"That's what I said."

"Man, that's a hell of a thing to join. They tell me half of 'em are hustlers."

"Yeh, I know," Scar said wearily. "I don't guess it's much else she can do. She can't stay with me forever."

"Naw, you would have gotten tired sooner or later," Jake said.

"Call Armenta, willya?"

Jake punched Scar on the shoulder. "O.K.," he said.

Scar sat at the bar while Jake went back of the Zodiac to the phone booths. Armenta answered the phone on the second ring.

"Hello," Jake said.

"Hello, Jake."

"What you talking so quiet for?"

"My daddy doesn't want me talking to you, that was the whole trouble."

"Your ole man?"

"Yes. He doesn't want me around you."

"I told you your ole man didn't like me."

"I know. He's sending me to school in New York next semester."

"After you got a scholarship at J City?"

"He figures I will forget you up there."

"Will you?"

"No."

"Looks like I threw craps," Jake said.

"I'll be back this summer."

"That won't mean nothing with your ole man ordering you to keep away from me."

"I'll see you anyway."

Jake laughed. A short guttural laugh. "I'm not in your class, Armenta. I should have known I had no business mixing with the four-hundreds."

"Don't say that, Jake."

"Well, that's right, ain't it? Your father thinks I'm garbage or something. Well, I may not go around with my nose stuck up in the air and talk all goofy like a professor or something, but I'll bet you this, I'll be driving a Cadillac next year and I'll have a house as big and pretty as his by the time I'm twenty-one."

"I didn't know you ever thought about houses and things like that."

"I'm going to show your ole man I'm just as good as he is."

"He doesn't have anything against you personally, Jake. He just thinks I should be interested in doctors, lawyers, architects, and people like that."

"What difference does it make what you are long as you got bread?"

"That's what worries him. He wonders what you're doing to have a new car and things like that. I wonder myself, sometimes," Armenta admitted.

. . . So Monk had been right all along.

"Jake! Jake, are you still there?"

"Yeh."

"I'm going to send you my address soon as I get to New York. Will you keep in touch with me, Jake?"

"Yeh," Jake said . . . I wonder myself, sometimes . . .

"I'll write you every day if you want me to."

"Yeh."

"Jake, will you write me?"

"Yeh." . . . sometimes — sometimes . . . *Whose side are you going to be on when it comes to that . . .*

"Jake?"

"Yeh." . . . I'm with you Monk, you know that . . .

"Do you love me?"

"Yeh." . . . I wonder myself, sometimes . . .

"I love you too, Jake. I'll write you, hear?"

"Yeh, sure." . . . sometimes . . . sometimes . . . sometimes . . .

He didn't bother to hang up the receiver. New York! Damn, all the way to New York. He found Scar at the bar and they went outside.

"You talk to her?"

"Yeh, I talked to her." They walked slowly down the street.

"What she have to say that was so important?"

"She's going to New York."

"Well, I guess I'll cut on in."

Jake's eye caught the neon sign over the Paradise flashing the name of the attraction at the club. "So that's what Benbow was talking about."

"What?"

"Dig the name, man, the name."

. . . MAXINE GOLDSTEIN AND HER ALL-STAR REVUE . . . The name flashed off and on the big rainbow-colored neon sign. Scar was a junkie without a needle.

"Let's go in, man," Jake said.

Kenny was forgotten. They checked their coats and hats at the cloakroom and got ringside seats. The floor show wouldn't start for another hour so they sipped on scotch over rocks and waited. Pretty soon Scar had to take a little trip.

It was the worst time in the world for this kind of action, as far as Scar was concerned, but it could not be helped. He had the choice of watching Maxine floating or sick. Time went fast for Scar after that and yet everything was slowed down like it had never been before. He had time to walk around the world on each second and yet it seemed the show started right after he got back. Spotlights danced all over everything. "Man, I'm floating," Scar said. He could see the music. He could actually see it. B flat was a nice golden yellow and man those blue notes were really blue. The notes floated out of the trumpets like silver discs, then jingled through the air like melting icicles when the trumpets screamed them out of shape. The notes from the saxes were doughnut-shaped and they kept changing from green to purple and dull orange. The guy on piano was building ivory stairways to the ceiling. The notes were so solid Scar bet he could walk all the way up to the top and sit down on nothing. He didn't know what the bass and drummer were doing, but they were kicking like wild. The notes kept exploding. He couldn't keep watching the orange flashes, it was like sticking your nose in a welder's torch. Then he saw Maxine come out in a white dress covered with sequins, open in front, showing her large, well-molded dancer's legs, going like crazy to the music in black lace stockings. She had a white hat full of black feathers bouncing on her head and she came out to the front of the stage and kicked her legs at the audience. He could see her thighs quiver with each thrust her legs made into the air. There was a mole painted on her left cheek. Her cold, intimate stage smile flashed at the audience. Then she looked down and Scar was sure she must have seen them because she seemed to freeze for a second. Then he didn't see her for a while because the group behind her swerved around her and she disappeared

in the middle. The music stopped; everyone clapped like crazy. Maxine was good; Scar felt great. The music started again, this time a slow mambo beat. Maxine's hips filled the stage, slowly gyrating to the sensual beat. Then she was standing over them again. "Hello, heel," she said. "What's wrong with your friend?" She whirled away, drifted around the stage and came back.

"Hi, Slim," Jake said. "How you been?"

"Hi, Scar," Maxine said. She wrinkled her nose at him. She slittered back to the other dancers and whispered something. Then she crisscrossed her way back up the stage.

"She's coming down the steps," Scar said.

Maxine danced down the steps and among the tables, the spotlight following her movements. She acted as though she would sit down on an old man's lap, the woman at the table brandished a pocketbook. Maxine hurried away, waving back at the man as she went along. The audience roared. She stopped at another table and poured herself a drink. She made a toast to the men at the table, took the drink over to another table and had a man there drink it. The crowd got a bang out of that too. Then she came over to Jake and Scar. "Hello, heel. When you start running with junkies!"

"What you talking about?" Jake said.

"Hello, Scar. I thought you had better sense than to get on the mainline kick," Maxine said contemptuously.

Scar couldn't say anything. He had been dreaming of seeing Maxine for months, but he couldn't say anything.

"You've changed," Maxine told Scar, shaking her head. "You had something women liked once. Too bad you didn't bring it around."

"Is that a proposition?" Scar said dully.

Maxine laughed in his face. She stroked Jake's face playfully. "Now here's a heel that's still got what all the women want."

"How you get the job, Slim?" Jake said.

"By sleeping with the boss. Next time you see me with a new one ask me again."

"You're still set on being a slut," Jake said quietly.

Maxine slapped him playfully. "You didn't call me one when I slept with you."

"What was that for?" Jake said. "Part of the act?"

"Yeah, the riot act. Why didn't you come to see me when I was in the hospital?"

"When was that? I didn't know nothing about it." Maxine wiped the corner of her eyes. "You're a liar. I wrote you a long letter giving all the details."

Jake thought of the letter he had received at school from Maxine that he had thrown away without bothering to read.

"Your son died in the hospital," Maxine said. "You didn't even think enough of him to come around and see us." Her hand exploded across Jake's face. She wiped the corner of her eyes and danced hurriedly away. The crowd got a real kick out of that. They stood up in their chairs cheering.

On the sidewalk, outside of the Paradise, Jake lit another cigarette. "You gave her a dirty deal," Scar said.

"Such is life in the big city," Jake said.

Scar took a punch at Jake and fell on his face. Jake picked him up and dumped him into the Dynaflow.

"You gave her a dirty deal," Scar muttered over and over again. "She's a slut. Maxine wasn't never a slut, but she is now. A sophisticated slut."

Jake was silent; he drove Scar home. "Better let me help you up the steps, man, you're wasted."

"Don't bother," Scar said slamming the door of the Dynaflow.

Jake could tell by Scar's eyes he meant it. He drove away slowly. He had to have time to think. He wondered how it would feel to be sitting on top of the world without any friends.

In bed Scar stared at the ceiling. He couldn't touch Kenny. He didn't know if he could ever touch any woman again.

Kenny thought he was drunk. When she got up at six o'clock he was still staring at the ceiling. "I'm going, Scar."

"O.K."

"I'll write you, hear?"

"O.K."

Kenny came into the bedroom and looked at Scar. "You was the best friend I ever had, Scar." She came over to the bed and kissed him quickly. She didn't tell him she loved him, she just walked out of the door. That was the last Scar ever saw of Kenny.

YOU ARE NO DREAM, no fantasy created by the mind. You are a lovely, vibrant woman whose warmth is hidden behind a veil of sophistication. You were not always so. You wear the mask of sophistication well. So well that most people cannot conceive of the person that you really are, or the things that you like to do. But, I know. I KNOW THE REAL YOU. I know you well, sophisticated lady. You are a career woman and you love your job. You have everything you want. Isn't that what you tell everyone? Ha, what a joke. The only thing you ever wanted was that guy that hung on the corner. The height of your ambition was a little white cottage full of little plump kids. But he walked out on you, didn't he, lady? Yeh, he walked out and sophistication walked in.

The Duke wrote a song about you, lady. You've heard it. It's called "Sophisticated Lady" and it fits you to a T. How does it go . . .

*They say,
Into your early life romance came . . .*

Romance came along and swept you off your feet and sent you soaring into the clouds like a hydrogen-filled balloon. Then someone stuck a pin in that balloon, and you hit the earth with a bang. You cried a long time, then you picked yourself up and covered the tears on your cheeks with powder, and your heart with sophistication. And the other part; how does it go?

Smoking, drinking . . .

Do you remember your first drink, sophisticated lady? It made you sick. And you never did learn to hold a cigarette correctly. But IT'S LUSH LIFE FOR YOU NOW, isn't it, lady? You've been in everything from gambling halls in the back of night clubs to parties where they drank champagne from a fishbowl. Yes, you've seen the sights. You're in them constantly and you play your part perfectly . . .

*I know,
You miss the love you lost long ago,
And when no one is nigh,
You cry your little heart out.*

Yes you still cry, but not with your heart. You cried that away long ago. How does the song end?

Sophisticated Lady, here's my toast to you . . .

Well, I can't drink a toast to you, sophisticated lady, but I got a rusty ole plunger that will give you a pretty good flight, and the thousand smoke rings I blow each night in my lonely vestibule I give and dedicate to you, for they represent the thousand hopes and countless dreams that have gone up

in smoke because of you. You want him, don't you, sophisticated lady? You want him back. You still want him bad, I know. I know what you want and how you feel. I know all about you. I know because the very same he did to you, you are doing to me . . .

The record player was not on, but Scar could hear the golden, melodious voice of Billy Eckstine very clearly.

7

JAKE STOOD in front of the Paradise, feet planted, hands shoved deep into the overcoat pockets of the gray velour overcoat with the belt-in-the-back. He couldn't get over it. First Armenta, now Scar. Scar moving like that and not even telling him he was leaving. Scar must not even be in the city any more, no one had seen him. A guy who was supposed to be your best friend, doing something like that? The hell with Scar, he didn't care. He thought about going in there and seeing Maxine, but he didn't. He walked down the street instead. He didn't blame Maxine for what she had done, but damn, how was he to know? Sleet fell like his thoughts, irritating as hell. He got into the Dynaflo and drove around, not going anywhere. He thought of going home and answering Armenta's letter. She had written him twice and he had not answered — yet. It wasn't that — he just didn't go in for that letter-writing stuff, that's all it was. He found himself getting out of the car and going into Cardoil's, one of those all-night restaurants, and kidding Sadie, a waitress, who used to like him when they were in high school. It was too crowded to talk much so he said he

would call her and left. Then he was on the highway going out to the city limits. *The prisoner always returns to the scene of the crime.* He found the motel, left the car, and hurried through the crazy sleet. He sat and drank scotch-on-rocks in the Purple Room and all the lights were colored with memories. He didn't give a damn. He heard the music and saw the violinist stroll among the handholding couples. He watched the candles flick their mocking flames over the checkered tabletops. It didn't bother him at all. He sat, he drank, he saw, and the crazy sleet fell.

February was a month of sleet. The streets were ice in February. The air was hoarse, wind-pained. Chattering people in bundled coats were trapped to complaining limbs, and brows were bonded to ice-locked thoughts in February.

8

MARCH CAME on a dying breath and coughed hard enough for kites to flop sickeningly in a phlegm sky. Robins paid for their foolhardiness when night came.

Pop Garveli stood behind the counter and rang up the cost of groceries on the cash register. "How's Jake?" Pop asked.

"Something's wrong with him, but I'm not sure what. You can't tell from looking at him, but something's wrong," Adams said.

"Well, you know how teen-agers are."

"Yeh. He'll be nineteen this month. I thought he was going to straighten out, but —" Adams threw up his hands. "I thought sure — when he went off to school and everything —"

"Well, I wouldn't worry none about it, Adams. Likely as not he hasn't made up his mind what he wants to do yet. I'll be willing to bet he goes back to school in September. You wait and see."

"I think he's got woman trouble," Adams said.

"Jake? That's the last thing I'd expect him to have. Ain't all the gals sweet on him?"

"I think he's found that gal I was always teasing him about making him settle down."

"Aw, you don't think he's got serious about some gal? He's too young for that."

"Sometimes I don't think that boy's too young for nothing. He got a couple letters from a girl named Armenta. I think she was the one in college with him. Anyway, the other day he wrote her, and he ain't one to write. He takes after me in that way."

"You think he's really gone and got serious?" Pop was amused. "Well, there's nothing like it. I remember when I first met — I'll be doggone if I had the slightest notion one day we'd have Georgia and — course afterwhile I figured I might, but by then it was too late to do anything about it. It's funny how a woman can grow on you, ain't it?"

"Yeh," Adams said dreamingly. "How's Georgia like college?"

"Well, you know she really wanted to go off to school, but — well, we couldn't afford it," Pop said uneasily.

"Yeh, I know how that is."

"She don't talk much about it. I guess she likes it well enough. She wants to be a teacher, so I figure she can get just as good an education at the city college as anywhere else. Besides, you know the graduates from City College get first crack at the jobs around here?"

"Is that right?"

"Yeh, that's what Mack says, and he ought to know. He's on the Board of Aldermen, so I figure she's better off going to school here anyway."

"I wish Jake hadn't of left college."

"You're just worrying about nothing. Jake's a fine boy, a real fine boy. You just wait, he'll prove it to you one of these days."

"I wish I was as sure about it as you are."

"Well, I know him pretty good, as good as you in some ways I suspect. He's got a lot of get-up-and-go about him. That's something most of this younger generation seems to lack, seems to me."

"Well — "

"It's the truth, Adams. Now you take most of that bunch hanging around Georgia. I wouldn't pay five cents for the futures of none of those fellows. You know why? They ain't got no gumption. Ain't never serious about nothing. They don't even know nothing about the world situation. Now I ain't never spent a day in college in my life, but even I read the papers. I know what's happening in the world and it seems a shame ain't none of those young college fellows got no interest in the world and the future. They're the ones got to take over after us older fellows drop out of the picture, and it scares me to death if you want to know the truth about it, Adams, it really does. Jake ain't like that. He's a serious boy, always has been, even when he was a little shaver."

"Yeh," Adams said.

"They got more opportunities, too, than Jake has. You know what I mean, Adams?"

"Yeh."

"But, he's head and shoulders over all of 'em."

"Aw, Pop."

"'Cause he ain't afraid of work, that's why. How many

fellows eighteen would take a job where they had to work ten hours a day, or night, all depending on when they tell him to come in?"

"Ten hours a day?"

"Yeh, you think any of those fellows coming around here to see Georgia would do it? Hell no they wouldn't. But look at the difference. Jake's got a new car and good clothes all which he pays for himself, while they're still sticking their hands out to their daddy. And Jake's a good steady worker, he was even around here. You think those people would have taken him back after he went off to school if he wasn't? Naw, you know they wouldn't have, Adams."

"Is that what Jake told you?"

"Yeh, he talks more than you think he does."

"Yeh," Adams said. "Yeh, he sure does."

From then on Adams lived in fear. *Women, gambling, all young studs do that.* What else was Jake doing? How much of a lover could you be? How lucky with a pair of dice or a deck of cards? What did Jake have on his side to make Lady Luck so faithful? Jake had given Pop a cock-and-bull story, what about himself? He didn't want to know what Jake was doing. He felt better not knowing. But wasn't he to blame, he was Jake's father, wasn't he? Even if they never talked like father and son, but more like man to man, still — He wasn't sure whether he was wrong or not in not butting in Jake's business. His own father had butted in his and he had hated him, and yet he and Jake had never been close, at least not in a long, long time. He couldn't help it if he didn't know the answer, could he? He hoped Jake would never make him sorry for his ignorance.

THEN SPRING CAME, and the marble games started along Peabody Avenue, the jumping from coalshed to coalshed, the walking of broad, rotting, wooden fences, the hopscotch games, the hidespy games with boys and girls going into the dark together hiding. The skate trucks roared, footballs sailed through the air. Children congregated on the sidewalks at night, their singsong voices chanting "Little Sally Walker." Slingshots broke out street lights. *Sitting in a saucer* — gambling wineheads found their spots in the alleys. *Rise Sally rise* — Welch Street mushroomed people. *Wipe your winking eyes* — the arguments in the houses, the splattering eating ware. Over on Bell Avenue the tamale man permeated the atmosphere with his steam wagon. Boy meets girl and disillusion. *Put your hands on your hips* — Molly's and the fat lonely owner watching overweight roaches run along the counter among soggy crumbs. The patrol car idly wanders the street. Radios blare boogie-joogie music through opened windows. Balls click in Booker's and the little back room finds the dice roaming. Guys linger on the wooden porches of the flats on the avenues, hands propped against a sagging rail, the cigarette smoke climbing, unblocked hats resting on ears, hats and smoke not quite shading the question in their eyes. The girls carry on conversation with their bodies. *And let your backbone slip* — night rains, the baby cries, the car horns sail, the dogs and people make a staccato street symphony. Parks laugh with people. Old men sip beer on porch swings. Animation curses the city with activity. *Oh baby shake to the east* — a new gang replaces the Barraudas. *Oh baby shake to the west* — Cugat jackets hit the market, the latest thing. Cugat jackets parade the streets in bright colors, blue, red, yellow, burnt-orange, green, the

pointed-collared lightweight jackets hang off the shoulders of the guys in the know. *Oh baby shake to the one you love the best.* The people welcome spring.

Jake was pleased with himself. He drove the new car away from the dealer's feeling the powerful motor vibrate under his feet. He had on his gray stingy brim, the new blue suede gaucho jacket, gray slacks and blue suede shoes. He felt like letting the top down on the big two-toned convertible with the blue top and gray bottom, but it was too cool for that. He wasn't even worried about the whitewall tires. It was easy to keep them looking good when you could pay somebody else to do the work. Hadn't he made it to Sadie and run across Pearl last week and shacked with her? And what about that new babe working in the ticket window at the Circle Theater? Her eyes weren't as big or pretty as Pearl's but anybody could see they were for him. It was a good world as long as you had money to buy it. So he felt good. Who in hell wouldn't if they could go out and buy themselves a Cadillac on their nineteenth birthday? He tightened his hands on the wheel of the car, controlling power, man, tons of it. He didn't much feel like going around the high school, most of the ole crowd didn't hang around there any more — Scar, Spider, Red. Well, you couldn't have everything. Feed the suckers the mainline, man, the baby needs milk, the Cad's got to have gas, the baby needs shoes, you can't run a Cad without tires. The Cad enjoys a man in the driving seat. The Cad was the best babe he knew, she gave you kicks, she performed to your commands and if you took care of her she took care of you, which was saying a hell of a lot. Feed the suckers the mainline — Red, Scar? Hell yes, man, feed the suckers the mainline. Maxine, Armenta — feed the suckers. He cruised down Welch Street for a while,

started for Booker's, changed his mind, turned the corner and went around to Peabody. He was starting for the next block when Georgia came out of the store and saw him.

10

"HI, JAKE," she yelled.

Jake drove over to the curb and parked. "Hi," he said. He had not seen Georgia in quite a spell, since he had not been in the store lately.

"That yours?"

"Yeh."

"It's foxy," Georgia said. "You're really doing all right."

"Thanks, what you been doing lately?"

"Nothing, except school. I should be studying but I got spring fever. Pop's been teasing me all week about that and boys," Georgia said weakly. She smiled at him. "I bet it rides real smooth."

"Yeh, sometime I might take you for a spin," he kidded her.

"What's wrong with now? Wait a second and I'll tell Pop where I'm going so he won't be worrying about me." She ran into the doorway of the store and called breathlessly, "Hey, Pop, Jake's taking me for a spin in his new car. Come on out and see it, it's real foxy."

Pop threw up his hands as if to say "What's the use?" to the middle-aged woman worriedly watching the price of her groceries mount up on the cash register. "Be right back," Pop said, following his daughter out of the store. "Hi, Jake."

"Hi Pop, what's new?"

"That car of yours, seems to me." Pop put his hands on his hips. "A 'forty-nine Cadillac — well, if that don't beat everything. You're not doing anything wrong like robbing old ladies to pay for that thing, are you?" Pop said laughing.

"Not yet," Jake said. "I might have to next month when the note comes up."

They laughed, all three together, on the sidewalk.

"Well, back to work for me. Don't stay away long, Georgia, you've got to cook supper tonight, don't forget. Maude's making a cook out of Georgia," Pop explained. "I guess it's about time, she thinks she's grown enough to do everything else."

"Oh, Pop," Georgia said. Pop waved to Georgia and Jake and went back into the store.

Georgia got in the car and they drove away laughing together about nothing. "I hear you say you're boy crazy?" Jake said teasing Georgia.

"Oh, Pop just likes to exaggerate. Jake —?"

"Huh?"

"What makes boys so vulgar?"

"How you mean?"

"Well, you know how everyone always says 'how you been doing'?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, all the fellows hang around in the hall and ask all the girls who have they been doing. Sometimes they can be so disgusting with their vulgarities."

Jake laughed. "Yeh, well you just watch out when the vulgarities don't seem so vulgar to you any more."

Georgia hit Jake playfully. She had not done that in years, not since they had become old enough to know what it meant to belong to different races. "What are you thinking?" she said, noticing the expression on his face.

"Oh, nothing."

"It couldn't be oh nothing, it would have to be oh something to make you look like that."

"You're about the only person I know could look at me and know something was on my mind."

"Maybe that's because I've known you longer than most people."

"Yeh — maybe."

"Well, what were you thinking?"

"Nothing important."

"Good, then you can tell me."

"Yeah?"

"Sure, if it's not important. People always talk about the unimportant, didn't you ever notice that?"

Jake smiled. "You've grown up to be awful wise for your seventeen years."

"Don't sound so ancient. You're only two years older than I am."

"Sometimes it seems like a million."

"I guess you've lived a pretty exciting life," Georgia said, making a statement out of it.

"Yeh."

"Some people are so fortunate."

"In what way?"

"Things just seem to happen to some people. You're that kind of person. Like when you ran the Termites."

"Me?" Jake said.

"Yes, you. Don't put on that goody-good look for me. I know you're a bad boy, you always were."

"Me!"

"No, Santy Claus."

Both were conscious of being stared at by people in passing cars or by pedestrians. They grew silent.

"I don't care," Georgia finally said flippantly, "do you?"

"Me? Hell naw," Jake said.

They laughed. They rode all over the city.

"Remember when I used to be your play sister?"

"Yeh. We sure goofed over the store. I don't know why Pop didn't fire me. Remember the time we ate all that candy when we thought Pop wasn't looking and got sick and he laughed at us?"

"Yeh. I should have known better than to listen to you."

"It wasn't my idea," Jake protested, "it was yours."

"We really got sick all right," Georgia laughed.

"Yeh, we sure did," Jake joined her.

They spent an hour remembering, then Jake took Georgia back to the store.

"You ought to take me out riding again sometime. I still need a brother," Georgia said.

"Aw, quit pulling my leg."

"Don't you want to be my brother?"

Jake thought of the car ride and the staring people. The unexpressed reaction started through him again. "Sure I do," he said very deliberately.

"O.K., then. I need some brotherly advice with all those mannish things pouncing at me from everywhere."

Jake laughed. "You're not conceited."

"I didn't mean it like —"

"I know what you mean. It's no mystery why they're pouncing at you from everywhere."

Georgia smiled.

"Goodbye, kid sister."

Georgia thumbed her nose at him.

SMOKE FOGGED the small back room. It was three in the morning and Spider had only one more hour to work. He was in a hurry to get home to Evelyn. She had been sick yesterday and was not feeling good when he left. She had told him it was to be expected and that sometimes expectant daddies get sick. He had never heard of that before. Man, that must really be something. He changed dice for a tall thin man and watched the game indifferently.

The door to the back room opened and a tall, well-built woman in an evening dress came in. She looked the place over rather skeptically. Then her mouth hardened and she walked over to Spider. "Hi, Spider."

"Maxine!" Spider said, surprised to see her. "Long time no see. I hear you're at the Paradise now. Me and Evelyn intended to get around to see you, but I work such funny —"

"I know," Maxine said squeezing his shoulder. "How have you been getting along?"

"Can't complain, out of touch with everything since I got hitched. You know me and Evelyn are expecting."

"No kidding?"

"Yeh, one kid anyway, Evelyn that is." Spider tossed a new set of dice to a shooter.

"Seen any of the ole gang lately?"

"Naw, I ain't. Jake ain't been in here since that first time. I ain't seen Scar either. I hear he ain't even in the city no more."

"Is that right?"

"Yeh, that's what they tell me. Funny how things change, ain't it?"

"Yeh, yeh, real funny, Spider."

"We had a lot of fun in the ole days, didn't we, Slim?"

"Yeh, lots of laughs, but you can't catch up with the past once it passes you by and there's no laughs in reminiscing, Spider. Did you know that?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, nothing, forget it. I guess I'll be going. I just thought I'd drop by and say hello, after I heard you worked here."

Little Sally Walker.

"Aw why don't you hang around a while, Slim? Got to fade to stay," Spider said to the hesitant thin man peering nervously at the shooter who had hit five straight licks. "I'll be off pretty soon. Why don't you go home with me? Evelyn would sure like to see you. She misses you and — Kenny."

"And Armenta," Maxine said.

Spider passed the dice off. "Yeh, yeh," he said slowly. "Yeh, she misses Armenta too."

"Funny about Scar," Maxine said. "You don't think he got busted, do you?"

"Naw, I don't think the bims got him, we would have probably heard about it if he had. He just quit it."

"Yeh, yeh, it's funny." *Sitting in a saucer.*

Maxine went home with Spider. Evelyn was in bed and wanted to get up but Spider and Maxine would not let her. *Rise Sally rise.*

Evelyn talked about the baby they were going to have and the peculiar experience of pregnancy. She told Maxine there was nothing like it. Nothing like it in the whole world. *Put your hands on your hips.*

"It's too bad about Scar," Evelyn said, "he was so nice."

"Yeh," Maxine said. Six feet tall, one hundred and seventy pounds of wiry muscle who was hell on a football field. He was the guy she used to get goose pimples looking at in grade school. One hundred and seventy pounds of wiry muscle stuffed full of junk. An athlete with a brain, dis-

guising his intelligence behind corner boy talk. Yeh, who used his brain to figure out how to get another fix — nice.

"Well, anyway, at least you're amounting to something," Evelyn told Maxine. "I'm so happy about your big break. Someday you got to tell me all about it."

Sure kid, tell you all about it. "Nothing to talk about really," Maxine said. *And let your backbone slip.* Nothing to talk about except the mocking sounds in the night, the endless bars, the price to pay for the spotlight. "You and Spider are the lucky ones. You don't know how lucky you are."

"How?" Evelyn wanted to know. "You're the celebrity."

"You've got each other," Maxine said. "I —" She was about to say that was the most important thing in the world, but what was more disgusting than a drunk fool crying in his beer?

"Funny how things work out in the end, ain't it?"

"The end hasn't got here yet, Spider," Maxine said.

Spider smiled. "You always was quick on the trigger, Slim, that's what Jake — that's what Jake always liked about you," he finished.

"You really must tell me about your big break, Maxine. It's so thrilling to think of somebody we know as a big-time celebrity," Evelyn said.

"Like I said, there's really nothing to it." Nothing at all. *Oh baby shake to the east.* You just trade long lean days and men for a soft career with hard hours, for security spelled with dollar bills, and count your breaks on the navels of fat paunches hovering over you for the pay-off. *Oh baby shake to the west.*

They talked about the fun they used to have.

"It's funny about things, how they change, I mean, ain't it?" Spider said.

No one had an answer. *Oh baby shake to the one you love the best —*

12

SHE READ his letter again. The same letter she had read many times. She remembered how strange he had sounded over the telephone the last time they had talked to each other. She had promised to write every day, but she hadn't. She had written once every week instead, five in all. He had written her only once, and it was not a long letter. Why did she like him so much? Was it because he was bad? Maybe people admired other people when they were bad because they did not have nerve enough to be bad themselves. She remembered in grade school and high school he was always the bad boy that all the teachers liked, though they sometimes pretended they didn't. She blushed because she knew she wanted to be in bed with Jake, and that was wrong. Was that what made love, wanting to be bad with someone? They had been bad together a lot of times. She blushed. She had been a regular little slut around him. She knew she was not really a nice girl at all, not like her father and mother thought she was. She couldn't help it though, she couldn't help it if she felt like that. She wondered when her father and mother went to bed did they feel — she really blushed about that. She was acting silly, she knew all about the birds and bees. And she hadn't, not with anyone but Jake, except that time with Scar. *Rise Sally rise —* One letter after all those times. She bet he didn't even remember them all. She did though,

in the spring, coming back from the Drive-In, that first time. *Wipe your winking eyes* — And the times she thought she would never again until she did. She could remember all of them, that last time in the motel — *Oh baby* — He probably even forgot that, he better not. Probably just wrote that one letter because he felt sorry for her. He said he loved her, not exactly like that, but in a funny way that first time after the Drive-In — she couldn't stop blushing. Why did she sit in the dormitory reading an old letter from Jake when she could be out with Lou Carl, who was going into interning next semester? All the girls liked him and he was going to be a doctor. He was real smooth and said he liked her a lot. She bet. She wasn't going out with him and let him get her some place where he could do that. Jake. Jake wouldn't even answer her letters. She threw the letter on the bed in disgust. He wasn't worth her thinking about for two seconds anyway. He was just a smooth talker and always had that little boy look on his face that made girls want to be nice to him. She bet he was running around with everything he could get his hands on while she was stuck away up here in New York. He'd better not. He'd better remember who's his ole lady. *To the east* — he wrote such uninspired letters, like they were answers to a chemistry problem or something. She wished he would have used some pretty words, some poetry even, but Jake was not that kind. He would think it was silly. Well, maybe it was, but she would have liked it. He said he would wait for her, but in his own way. She wondered what he meant by that. There was only one way to wait for someone, to be true. He'd better, she thought. She almost felt he was mocking her for all the silly questions she had written asking him about. She wouldn't have only, well after all she had broken things up, hadn't she, listening to her father and his talk about respectability and the source of Jake's money? It wasn't any of his

business. *To the west* — She had to admit she wondered, she had even told Jake she did. She did not want to know though, she was scared to know. JAKE HAD ALWAYS BEEN A BAD BOY. He never did anything really wrong though. People would not like him if he had. *The one you love the best* — All at once she was scared, more than she had ever been before, more even than when she was five and fooling around in the closet and the door had closed, trapping her in the dark.

13

IT WAS THE third time he took Georgia out riding that bothered him. It had been at night, and he went out on the highway and really opened the Cadillac up. The state patrol had caught them and Georgia had been scared, and had never understood how he had gotten out of a ticket, especially with that big one getting so mad. Yeh, he had really been mad all right. It was that Trashwagon guy again. He was mad because Georgia was in there with him, but it wasn't nothing he could do about it. Trashwagon wouldn't have said a damn thing if Georgia hadn't been there, Jake knew damn well he wouldn't. But that wasn't what bothered him, that was incidental. What bothered him was the way he had let Georgia pry him open and get him talking about himself. Like Georgia said, people only talk to each other about unimportant things. He knew that was the way it was, yet he had found himself really talking to Georgia about things. It didn't pay to talk too much to nobody. That was what was

wrong, that and the fact that he didn't quite think of Georgia in the way you were supposed to think of a sister. He wondered if Georgia really thought of him as a brother. He looked at Georgia more as a female than any brother would ever do, not that it meant anything. A fella had to draw a line somewhere. He had told Armenta he would be true to her in his own way. Well, he had. Everybody knew love and sex were two different things. No dame in her right mind would expect a stud not to do anything. He wasn't becoming involved with any other babe, getting serious or anything like that, but hell, after all he was human. He didn't know how he expected Armenta to be, he didn't like to think about it. He knew she was human, so — He couldn't justify not wanting her to, but he didn't want her to. Whenever the thought came up intellect and emotions fought each other and so he always ended up dropping the problem. The world was as mixed up as a hophead trying to wean off on lemonade, and people didn't help it any. He liked Georgia, not like he liked Armenta, but he liked her. That would be wrong, he knew it. That was a hell of a note, thinking of something as right or wrong. People should do what they wanted to do. Right and wrong had nothing to do with it. He didn't believe that heaven and hell crap, or that God looked out for what happened on earth and the rest of that Mickey Mouse junk. Yet, here he was coming up with a conscience after all. Well, that just went to show you. The hell with it, he wasn't going to worry about it. He would let things follow their natural course. Whatever happened, happened, that was all. After all it was Georgia wanting him to take her riding and he liked being out with her, because she took his mind off a lot of things. In fact, the last time they went riding was the first time he had speeded on the highway in weeks. He didn't feel he had to get rid of so

much pent-up energy when he was with her, so what was so wrong in that?

"Hi, Jake," Georgia called, coming out of the store and getting in the car.

"Hi, Georgia. How you feeling?"

"Fine, let's drive through the park."

Georgia's hair looked almost black in the semi-darkness of the car. It had a luster to it, a spark, not like Armenta's which was jet black, silky and long. Georgia's hair was cut short, heavier, and the luster seemed more golden in texture.

"You know you grew up to be quite a looker, kid sister," Jake said.

"I didn't know brothers paid any attention to the looks of their kid sisters," Georgia said.

"They don't," Jake said.

"We can't be the way we used to, can we?" Georgia said.

"How you mean?"

"You know how I mean," Georgia said.

"Yeh," Jake said. "I know."

"I wonder why?" Georgia said.

"I guess people can't help but change."

"I guess not, it's not that —"

"I know, but it's not the same."

"No, that's right, it's not," Georgia said. "I don't care, it's still sister and brother, only a different kind." She hit Jake playfully.

The park was filled with people enjoying the pleasant weather before the rains came.

"It's nice out," Georgia said.

"Yeh, when it gets a little warmer I can drop the top down."

"Why don't you do it now?"

"I drive too fast," Jake said. "We'd freeze to death."

"Well, I wouldn't want to die by freezing. I can wait for warmer weather."

"I wouldn't want to die any kind of way," Jake said. He had Georgia laughing again.

"You can't live forever."

"Naw, but you can try hard as hell."

"How did we get on that subject?" Georgia said.

"I don't know, I didn't know we were on a subject."

"It's too nice a night and we're too young. Let's talk about something else."

"What?"

"Why are you so bad?"

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. Tell me some more about the time you were president of the Termites."

"Aw," Jake said.

"Why did you fight other gangs?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why? You have to have a reason to fight, don't you?"

"I never thought about it," Jake said. "I guess you do."

"Well, why?"

" 'Cause it's the thing to do."

"How do you mean?"

"Gangs always fight each other. They always have."

"They have?"

"Sure, ever since I've known anything about it they have."

"Well, that doesn't tell me why."

"You just do, that's all I know."

"Is it because you don't like the other gangs?"

"Naw, not especially till you start fighting 'em."

"I don't understand it," Georgia said.

"You do it to prove you ain't chicken."

"I don't understand it," Georgia said.

"You got to prove who's the toughest."

"It doesn't make sense," Georgia said.

"That's the only way to think if you ever think about it," Jake said.

"About what?"

"Anything," Jake said. "You take sports. What kind of sense does it make when you start to think about it?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, take tennis. You take one little ball, two big paddles, and a net. Then you wait till a nice warm day and two people chase that little ball all over the court in the hot sun to hit it with a paddle, what kind of sense does that make?"

"Oh, Jake," Georgia said.

"Take golf. You take a little hard ball, place it on a pin, rare back with a club and hit it just as far as you can. Then you walk after it, to get a chance to hit it again, and the harder you whack it the longer you got to walk. Then when you finally get the ball where you want it, what do you do? You push it in a little hole in the ground. Now what kind of sense does that make?"

"Aw, Jake," Georgia waved a hand at him.

"That's the truth."

"You make it sound so ridiculous."

"That's the way it is when you start thinking about it. Another good example is baseball, now —"

"I'll take your word for it," Georgia said with a grin. "But that's with sports."

"That's with everything," Jake said.

"Such as?"

"You name it."

"O.K., how about religion. What's so silly about that?"

"Are you kidding?"

"I hope not." Georgia laughed. "I mean I heard you play that smart crack on people before."

"Well, I don't know if it quite fits you."

"Why not?"

"I can't see why you would be hoping not."

"Why?"

"Well, the Immaculate Conception is one of those silly things in religion which we were about to talk about."

"Why?"

"'Cause a woman's got to have a man in the driving seat, if she's ever going to produce something to keep a man up walking nights."

"I don't see how that —"

"Well, you can see where that applies to you. You have to have a man to be kidding."

"Oh," Georgia said, her voice inflecting slightly.

"Didn't you know?"

"You're the one that seems so sure I don't know."

"Well, have you?" Jake said raising an eyebrow.

"Have I what?"

"Been doing any driving lately?"

"I've been riding with you."

"I mean in your seat."

Georgia blushed. "I'm not going to tell you."

"Why?"

"It's too personal."

"I thought brothers and sisters were supposed to be able to talk about personal things."

"Would you talk to me about things that personal?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'm not going to tell you."

"Why not?"

"You didn't ask me as a brother."

"How did I ask you?"

"Like somebody wanting to do some driving."

"I guess that's what it sounded like all right," Jake said.

"That's O.K.," Georgia said. "That's what I sounded like too."

They looked at each other.

"You ready to go home, Georgia?"

"If you want to take me home."

Jake shrugged.

"Jake?"

"Yeh."

"You ever think much about things?"

"Not unless I can't help it."

"I do all the time. I get so confused. I mean when you start trying to think about God, and the world and things like that — I mean my math teacher said you can't think of religion intellectually. You have to accept it on faith just like the basic premises in mathematics."

"Yeh."

"But — I mean, it doesn't make sense."

"You sound like somebody else I know."

"Who?"

"A girl named Armenta," Jake said matter-of-factly.

"Do you like her?"

"Why you ask that?"

"Oh, I dunno. You sound like you might."

"I do?"

"Yes, every time you start to sound very casual about something, it usually means something to you."

"You know me real good, don't you, Georgia?"

"Sometimes."

He looked at her. "I don't feel like your brother," he said.

"You told me that."

"I mean it's different."

"I know that."

"Well — "

"I don't mind you feeling like that."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I told you, I keep getting confused every time I try to figure things out."

"You been thinking about it?"

"I've thought about it a lot. I don't care. I like to go riding with you because we've lived such different lives. It's so interesting the things you tell me about. I get so bored all the time," Georgia said.

"Bored about what?"

"Everything. Every day is like every other day, nothing exciting ever happens. Jake — "

"Yeh."

"What's ridiculous about love?"

"You ever been in love?"

"No."

"Then that's probably why you don't know."

"Well, what's so ridiculous about it?"

"Because it seems to change everything, but it doesn't change nothing, not a damn thing."

"How's that?"

"Well, you know how you meet somebody you like, I mean you know something about them attracts you?"

"Yes."

"Well, what usually happens, you start going out together kissing and all that kind of stuff and then the girl always talks about she doesn't want to. Well, anyway if she likes you she does when the deal goes down. Love's the same thing and just because it's love you think it's the greatest thing in the world, but how could it be, since it's the same things you're doing? I mean — well, look at all the things that happen when you really care about somebody, you want to be around 'em all the time and the next thing you know,

you're wondering if they're thinking about doing something to someone else what seems so great that they do to you, and like I say, it's the same thing anyway so what difference should it make, you follow me?"

"I'm afraid I don't," Georgia said.

"Well, what I mean is you get a lot restrictions with love and worries and everything which you wouldn't have if you weren't in love, and all you get out of love is the same thing you can get from someone without being in love, but you think you're getting something else because you're in love. See what I mean?"

"A little. Jake, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"I don't know how to put it. Do — what I mean is, do colored girls go to bed with somebody just because they like them?"

"It depends on how smooth the guy is, you know what I mean?"

"Uh-huh. I shouldn't have asked you that, should I?"

"Why not?" Jake said, knowing very well what she meant.

"I don't know. You know what I mean."

"Yeh."

"Jake, our ancestors really messed up the world, didn't they?"

"Didn't they," Jake said.

"They're still messing it up too."

"Yeh. You know something?"

"What?"

"Other side of the fence, those babes, you know?"

"You mean do they?"

"Yeh."

"They're about the same way, I guess. Everyone says they don't, but they do sometimes."

"Yeh," Jake said.

"I guess all of us are human," Georgia said, almost as if she were apologizing.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"Why are we so curious about what goes on on each other's side of the fence?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because our worlds are so different."

"You really think so?"

"I guess."

"Sometimes I wonder. Not any more, but I used to. I mean — well, I've never been much of a thinker. Whenever something gets complicated I sorta push it aside. I only really start thinking now when I'm around you."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Aw." Jake shoved her playfully. "That's the truth though, I never have. It interferes too much with you doing something if you think about it. Like me and you for instance. Now if I hadn't thought about it I probably would have hit on you."

"And thinking about it changed your mind."

"Yeh."

"Why?"

"Aw, forget I said it. What I mean is what the hell is the use of worrying about something?"

"You think thinking and worrying are the same thing?"

"Sure, the only difference is when you worry you just never do anything. When you think about something you do nothing until you stop thinking about it. That's not enough difference to be two different things."

"You sure think funny."

"Yeh, but you know what? I bet there ain't much differ-

ence in our worlds. I bet you got corner boys, gash hounds, and everything else, in fact, I know you have. Well, you got a dividing line that gives you more opportunities, but that's about all. I mean everybody loves and hates and has babies and pulls creeps — ”

“Creeps?”

“Yeh, sneaks in the back door when the ole man goes out the front. And everybody gets bills and goes to church and don't believe in it, and drinks whisky, or shoots themselves with a plunger, and everybody lives and dies, don't they?”

“But, don't you think those opportunities mean a whole lot?”

“Yeh, they make a difference, whatever difference there is.”

“Don't you ever get mad sometimes about that, Jake?”

“Me, naw. It ain't never stopped me from doing anything I wanted to do.” Jake turned to Georgia. “You know I never think about being, you know, the minority. I guess it's because I ain't never around nobody that ain't got the same kind of skin as me most of the time. But a lot of guys ain't like me, a lot of studs think about that line all the time, you know what I mean?”

“I can remember when you thought about it.”

“When?”

“The first time you took me out riding.”

“Yeh.” He had forgotten about that.

“Another time too.”

“When?”

“A few minutes ago when you were talking about you might have made a pass at me if you hadn't thought about it.”

“Naw, that wasn't why, I wasn't thinking about no line, well, not that line anyway.”

"What were you thinking about?"

"You're full of a lot of questions, kid sister."

"Is anything wrong with that?"

"Some of them might not be so good for you."

"I'm three times seven."

"You're not."

"Socially I am," Georgia said primly.

"Since when?"

"Since I started going riding with you."

"If you say so," Jake said.

"Well, what was the line?"

"You know that girl you asked me did I like?"

"Armenta?"

"That's the one."

"What about her?"

"Well, you know."

"Love?"

"Well, we're supposed to be real tight. We were at one time. She's in school in New York, and — aw, you don't want to hear about it," Jake said.

Georgia looked at him waiting for him to continue.

"You want to go out on the highway? I feel like taking a run."

"You mean go speeding like you did the last time?"

"Yeh. You ain't scared are you?"

"Of course not, I think it's foxy. I mean it's so thrilling and scary."

"I thought you said you weren't scared."

"I'm not. I mean it's fun being scared. You're going to get a ticket though."

"Not a chance."

"Haven't you ever been scared of having an accident?"

"Naw, you?"

"Uh-huh, that's what makes it so scary and fun."

"You know what, Georgia? I ain't never been scared of getting hurt doing nothing. I always felt couldn't nothing happen to me, that's funny ain't it?"

"Yes, how can you feel like that?"

"I don't know. You know what? I don't even believe I can die. I know I'm going to one day, but I can't believe it."

"I'd be afraid to say that."

"Why?"

"I'd be afraid something would strike me dead for daring to say something like that."

"You mean God? You think if there was one he'd care what we said about him?"

"Let's not talk any more about that, it scares me."

"I thought you liked to be scared?"

"Not like that." Georgia shivered. "You know, I bet that's what girls like about you, you seem so sure about everything. You even walk around like a little tin soldier. How do people get like that, Jake?"

"Like what?"

"Like you."

"I don't know. I always felt that way, Georgia."

"You couldn't have."

"As far back as I can remember."

"That's why they like you, Jake. That's the secret of your success."

"That's why I like you," Jake said teasing Georgia. "You say such nice things about me."

"That's why you were the leader of the gang instead of the follower. Maybe that's why I told you — that line." She turned from him quickly.

I'll be true in my fashion. He felt like he was stabbing himself in the back. It hurt like hell to twist your arm

around that way. But, he knew he might do it. He was capable of doing anything. Georgia his sister. Pop and Mrs. Garveli who treated him like a son. Who trusted him with Georgia like they never trusted any boy. Another line, Georgia, stronger than ten thousand of those other lines, stronger than ten million, stronger than ten hundred thousand zillion —

“Jake.”

“Huh?”

“I was talking to you.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t digging.”

“I was talking about — ”

“Oh, forget about it Georgia, it’s not worth talking about.”

The line was drawn, he dare not cross it. He hoped she didn’t want him to cross it, but she was a girl and he knew girls. He knew the signs. He had spent his whole life around girls, studied them the way professional baseball pitchers study their delivery. It was his profession. Women and money were the only things that mattered in this world. It took some guys a hell of a long time to find that out, but he knew it early, damn early. He wouldn’t be running after young girls when he was fifty, he would have burned out by then, he got his now, in his youth, when any respectable man was supposed to get them, but not Georgia. After all, what would it prove? Nothing, another conquest, so what?

“Watch out, Jake,” Georgia said, as he almost hit a passing car.

Jake stopped the car on a lane in the park. “I better stop awhile, until I get my mind back on driving,” he said.

Georgia looked at him strangely, but said nothing. He noticed the way her breasts pushed against her blouse, the almost sleepy way she held her eyes. The sharp nose, high cheek bones, the warm mouth, the full hips pushing against

the tight skirt, and the flash of legs which he knew had golden hair on them above the bobby sox. He didn't want Georgia, not much he didn't.

"You've gotten awful quiet," Georgia noted.

"I'm sorry."

"You're exciting when you're quiet," Georgia said.

They turned toward each other at the same time. She moaned against him wrestling him with her mouth, her breasts rigid, heaving against his chest. He was lost with Georgia down on the seat. Georgia sounded like she was crying, crying with her mouth against his. But he could not be sure because he could not see her face. He could not see anything. He felt her legs respond to his demand.

"Jake, we mustn't."

The line vanished. Nothing in the world could stop him now!

The blinding light. "You heard me, get up from there!"

Georgia jumped, her heaving body now rigid against his. How long had that light been in his eyes?

"You bastard, that's against the law. Get up from there you son-of-a-bitch. Be quick about it! Get yourself decent, sister," the policeman said derisively. His thin face was flushed, in knotty cords. "Don't you know any guys in your own race that want to lay you? You must be pretty hard up to let a son-of-a-bitch like that crawl between your legs!" The thin officer's face looked as if knots were going to squeeze his features to death.

"Now look —" Jake said.

"You, you — buddy, you better be careful, real, real careful. You're in real trouble, trouble like you ain't never seen before."

Georgia sat all the way down on the end of the seat straightening her clothes, burning with shame.

"You're in real trouble," the cop said.

"How?" Jake said, now having recovered somewhat from the shock of getting caught.

"Who in hell do you think you are? You know damn well you can't get away with taking a white girl — "

"Who sez?"

"You'll stay in jail for the rest of your life, if you're lucky enough to get to jail."

"Jail, for what?"

"For taking a white — "

"This ain't Mississippi."

The officer was taken aback by Jake's manner. Though Jake did not realize it, that was what had saved him from being pistol whipped. The officer had expected terror and failing to find it had become flustered and not given full vent to his anger. "You son-of-a-bitch, we'll get you for statutory rape if nothing else."

"Not in this state. I'm a minor too, so neither of us can be held responsible."

"You smart son-of-a-bitch, how do you know so much 'bout the law?"

"I had a government course in college, and my name ain't son-of-a-bitch," Jake said.

The officer patted his pistol. "I ought to shoot you right now."

"Then how you going to explain it, you think she won't have nothing to say about it?" Jake said.

"We'll get you for having sex in public if nothing else, that's against the law."

"That's worth a fine, but that's all. You can't get me in jail on a charge like that, Pres."

"The hell we can't."

"Well, let me tell you something before you go to do

something like that," Jake said, now beginning to feel cocky. "You know who you owe your job to?"

"What the hell you talking about? Get out of the car, you're taking a little trip downtown."

"You owe your job to a certain guy, you want to keep it, you better lay off me."

"What?" the astonished officer said.

"You don't believe it, you take me down and we'll see who does what to who. This guy I'm thinking of don't like none of his boys being drug downtown, and he might take care of things like that by kicking you off the force so you don't go around embarrassing him, you dig?"

"Get out," the officer said, drawing his gun.

"Have it your way," Jake said.

"How you know so much about the force?" the policeman suddenly said.

"I'm on the payroll just like you, just in another department, that's all."

"You seem kind of young."

"You seem kind of old," Jake said now more sure than ever.

"Well, I'll check. I'm taking your license."

"O.K. with me."

"Brother, if you're pulling a fast one, I'll find you if I have to chase you all over hell."

Jake got out a cigarette and lit it.

The cop flushed. "Say look, why you have to talk so freely in front of — " He nodded his head toward Georgia, talking in a low voice.

"You didn't give me any choice," Jake said.

"Well, you better know how to handle it."

"If I couldn't, I wouldn't be on the payroll."

"Well, let me give you a bit of advice. Everybody ain't on the payroll."

"Then they ain't on the force."

"I'm speaking facts. Yeh, guys like me, the little guys, we're hooked. But some of the big boys are independent, independent as hell. People like the D.A. for one, and some of the judges."

"So what?"

"So watch yourself, 'cause if you ever go down to one of those courts, it ain't guaranteed you'll come out on top."

"If you lay off me, I can't very well go down, can I?" Jake said.

The officer shifted around awhile, then he walked away without saying another word. Who in hell does that guy think he's fooling, Jake thought. Some of the guys weren't on the payroll. That was so much crap. They had to be to work in this town. Monk said he would be in when elections came, didn't he? O.K., elections were here. Monk had everybody in the swing, he knew it. Monk could do anything.

"Jake."

He turned to find Georgia looking at him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You didn't know we — we'd get caught." She was burning with shame again.

"I mean for everything. I didn't mean to do that."

"It was my fault too."

Jake shook his head. "All mine, Georgia. I made you."

"No you didn't."

"I could have stopped it before it started. I stopped the car."

"Did you have that in mind when you took me riding?"

Jake shook his head.

"Then it's not your fault. It just happened, Jake."

"I really wanted to be your brother real bad, Georgia."

"We did try to be like that, didn't we, Jake?"

"Yeh, we tried. We tried, Georgia."

"I suppose now, I don't suppose we could ever now."

"I think I could, Georgia. I think —"

"Until some night when — I'm so ashamed."

"Georgia, if we ever — I mean if I feel like, or you do, when we do we'll say to each other, time to go home, and then we'll go riding again when we don't feel like that, O.K.?"

"Do you think we could?"

"Sure."

"O.K." She smiled at him. She suddenly buried her nose in his chest and was his sister again. He knew it. He could feel it.

"No hard feelings?"

"There never were any hard feelings between us, Jake."

"No, that's right. You know, Georgia, that's why I want to be your brother. You know something about romance? It's like a war. Both people are fighting against each other, you know what I mean?"

"No."

"I mean the stud uses every trick he can think of to get the babe in bed with him, and the babe uses every trick she can think of not to go to bed and keep the stud around at the same time and then get him to go to bed with her when she figures it's time for it."

"You say such funny things."

"But, it's the truth."

"Jake, I think I can."

"Sister?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

"You can't feel like a sister, silly, you're a boy."

"I mean —"

"I know what you mean," Georgia said.

"Remember that time —?"

"Which one?"

"That time we tied all your hair ribbons on the cat's tail?"

Georgia laughed. "She looked so funny."

"Oh, was it a she? I always thought she was a he."

"I bet you don't have that trouble now thinking a he is a she."

Jake laughed. He had crossed that line, but everything had turned out all right. Maybe that was the way it had to be done. Maybe he had had to cross that line for them to get that old feeling back. "You still want to go out to the highway?" The thought suddenly hit him, it was a good thing that it had not been Trashwagon who had caught them. Trashwagon would have shot him. A chill flashed through his body. He was sure of it.

"You going speeding on the highway?"

"Naw," Jake said. "I don't think I want to ever go speeding again. You know why?"

Georgia shook her head.

"'Cause you give me the feeling I was trying to get speeding. That's funny, ain't it?"

Georgia nodded. "I'm glad," she said.

Jake took the Cadillac out on the highway carefully. "I once did this curve doing seventy-five," he said.

"That was crazy."

"Yeh," Jake laughed. "Yeh, that's what Spider said."

"Jake?"

"Yeh."

"You're in the rackets, aren't you?"

"Huh?"

"That's how you make so much money."

He had forgotten all about shooting his fool mouth off back there in the park. He shrugged.

"Jake."

"Yeh."

"I wish you weren't. I guess it's too late now, but I wish you weren't." She shuddered.

"Why?"

"It's so dangerous. Why do you always have to do things so dangerous?"

"It's not dangerous," Jake said. "No more than driving on a highway without a curve in sight."

"But, there's a curve somewhere, over the next horizon."

"Yeh, somewhere."

"But, that's what I mean. The guys in the rackets always — Oh, Jake, I don't want that to happen to you."

"You've been looking at too many movies."

"Life is full of curves too, Jake."

"Yeh, but you just lean into 'em, Georgia, just lay with 'em, they straighten out."

"Oh, Jake," Georgia squeezed his shoulder.

It was a simple curve, not much of that really, and he was driving at a moderate speed. As he was coming out of the curve he saw the big trailer truck, on the other side of the highway, going at least sixty and jamming the air brakes to cut down.

"He's waiting a little late," Jake said casually.

"Who?"

"That truck. I'd hate to have to wrestle that baby." A car appeared behind the trailer. "That fool's following the truck too close," Jake said.

"Oh!" Georgia caught her voice.

The car lurched, then skidded crossways on the highway over into Jake's lane.

"Hang on."

"Can't you stop?"

"He's too close," Jake said matter-of-factly. He felt cool, strong, invincible. He hit the brakes, not hard enough to throw the car out of control. NOT THAT WAY YOU FOOL. He would hit the car for sure that way. He jammed the accelerator to the floor, the Cadillac leaped. He cut the wheel sharply, missing the car and hitting the shoulder of the road. Around the side of the road the way the motorcycle studs ride the walls in the circus. He saw the terrified face of the driver, who had lost control, as he went around him on the shoulder. He cut the wheel back gradually, the accelerator all the way down. Come on baby, come on, Jake thought. Come on. The motor roared, all the horsepower charging. The front wheels hit concrete again. Come on. The Cadillac clawed at the concrete. Come on. The hood peeked at the road. Jake smiled, cool, confident. COME ON! The big car fought its way back. The shoulder crumbled, gave way.

"Come on!" Jake yelled.

For one split second the big car hung roaring for life halfway back on the concrete. The back wheels spun on nothing. The motor held it there. Then it spun the other way.

"Come on!"

Jake's blood was ice. Georgia screamed. The stars reversed themselves.

IT WAS NOT much of a news item, so unworthy that it barely made the back pages of the three daily newspapers, but a

little green weekly tabloid gave the city a warning of what could develop. This tabloid, *The Viewer*, a scandal sheet about Negroes, gave it the right-hand slot on the front page and huge black boldface headlines.

INTER-RACIAL LOVERS COURT DEATH ON HIGHWAY

Death ended the affair of two teen-aged lovers who —

Peabody Avenue was alive with speculation concerning Jake and Georgia. The scandal sheet read like a dime-store novel and was just as imaginative. Business was quiet in the Garveli grocery store. The proprietor, a broken man, drummed his fingers absent-mindedly on the counter and stared vacant-eyed at the empty store. Those were the early days, the days before the funeral.

Out on Merchant Place Henry Arnez laid his pipe aside and carefully folded the back sheet of the daily paper. "Hey, hey Edna," he said to his wife sitting quietly across from him in the living room.

"Yes, Henry."

"You remember when you were telling me I didn't have nothing to worry about Armenta riding back with that Jake Adams bird?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, he had an accident out on Sixty-six."

"Oh," Mrs. Arnez said. "He didn't get hurt, did he?" She looked at the set expression on her husband's face. "How badly?"

"Aw, he'll be all right. It doesn't say he's on the critical list, but he killed the girl that was riding with him."

"Henry, what are you talking about?"

"The girl that was with him, she got killed in the wreck."

She was about the same age as Armenta. She was a white girl," Mr. Arnez fired the accusation at his wife.

"Oh."

"I told you something was wrong about that guy. You'll learn to listen to me one of these days. You still so sorry your daughter's in New York? I knew what I was doing, getting her away from him."

"Henry, that's no way to talk. You should be sympathetic. I know the boy must feel dreadful about the girl, and he's hurt in the hospital."

"But, your youngest is safe in New York. He had a Cadillac too, a 1949 Cadillac, did you know that? That's what he smashed up. How do you explain that, huh? Nineteen years old with a Cadillac. I'm almost three times nineteen and I ain't got one, and I've been working all my life."

"I feel so sorry for him," Mrs. Arnez said.

"Phapst," exploded Mr. Arnez.

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ARMENTA READ the letter from her mother telling about Jake and the accident, and the white girl. That was Georgia, Jake had told her how close he and Georgia were. She bet everybody was kicking up dirt about it. Just because Georgia was white, they were saying all kinds of dreadful things about what they did together. People just liked to be evil-minded. Jake and Georgia weren't anything like that. Oh, Jake, I just knew something was going to happen. I knew it. If I had been there it would never have happened, or would it? Would she have been the one in the car instead of Georgia?

It was her father's fault, all his. Oh, Jake, don't be hurt too badly; but her mother said he was not on the critical list. Jake, you get into so much trouble all the time. He had a Cadillac, when did he get that? He meant what he said about how he was going to show her father. He just made it all the worse. Her father would be throwing that accident up to her for the rest of her life. Oh, Jake, how did it feel to have someone die while you were driving the car? How did it feel to do all the things you have done, Jake? How did it feel to be a gang leader and to make so much money you could buy a Cadillac when you're not even twenty yet? Jake, did you know I don't think about you as much as I used to? I've forgotten you a little, but I won't any more, I swear it. I'll never forget. I'll never forget I love you. I don't care what they say about you. I went out with that intern, Jake. We didn't do anything, just went out, like — like you and Georgia. It was fun being out with him, but how could I forget you, even for a second? How could I have so much fun with someone else and not you? I didn't have fun. Yes I did, I did. But you wouldn't want me to sit around and not do anything all the time, I know you wouldn't. You never told me you would. Jake, last year this time, when you first drove me home from school, weren't those such easy, simple days?

The buzzer rang in her room. That was her intern calling for her. She wouldn't go, she did not want to go out with him. She reached for her sweater knowing it was chilly outside. She wouldn't go if she thought she would have as much fun tonight as she had last night. She would write Jake first thing when she got back. She could not help him by staying in her room living like a hermit, could she?

GEORGIA'S FUNERAL was crowded. It was quiet, it did not last long. The church was a field of white faces, hushed, quiet, reverent. One lonely dark face was present on the end of a church bench in the back. The face was sorrowful, looking the way real sorrow looks in a face.

"That's the father of the boy who had the accident," the congregation whispered.

"It's strange."

"Yes."

The congregation was sorry with the sad, dark face. Many people there were not friends of the Garvelis. They had come attracted by the small news article in the daily papers. They had come as thrill seekers, but the funeral was too poignant, too terribly personal. The thrill seekers could see themselves in Pop Garveli's eyes. They did not follow the family to the cemetery.

ASHES TO ASHES — The casket was lowered into the ground. The cemetery was silent, infinite, absolute. Pop suddenly broke away from his wife and relatives and walked over to Jake's father.

"I don't know what to say," Adams said.

"How's Jake?"

"The doctor says he should be around in a month."

"Nothing serious?"

"No."

"That's good."

"He says he's sorry about Georgia."

"I know. He told us, when we went to see him."

"Why couldn't he have been more careful?"

"It wasn't his fault. They showed us the accident report.

They weren't driving fast, only about forty. The guy behind the trailer truck lost control of his car when he tried to keep from hitting the trailer truck slowing down for the curb. He skidded clear across the other lane where Georgia and Jake were. Jake tried to go around, but there wasn't room enough. The guy said Jake saved his life because if he had hit him he wouldn't have had a chance. Your boy took it pretty bad about Georgia, did you know that, Adams?"

"Yeh."

"He said something about a line, it didn't make sense. He blames himself. I wish he wouldn't."

"If Georgia hadn't been with him."

"Well, it was like brother and sister."

"Yeh."

"I know that's all it was. They were always like that."

"Yeh, ever since they was little."

"It seems like a dream," Pop said choking up. "A silly dream that don't make no sense, no sense at all, Georgia — in the ground."

"I wish it was."

"I hope you don't ever lose your boy —"

Adams could not say anything, both of them were choked up. He had already lost his boy. He knew that. He had lost him long ago. He couldn't even talk to him when he was lying hurt in a hospital bed. Jake had told Pop more than he had told him. He hadn't told him anything, just looked at him, not saying anything, but there was hurt in his eyes, hurt for what he had done. Maybe that was why he couldn't talk to him about it. But he had talked to Pop.

"It's funny being without Georgia," Pop said. He seemed to shrivel up, he could not say any more. He turned slowly and walked away.

Adams lingered in the cemetery staring at the fresh grave.

Georgia was dead. Georgia was a part of him that had died. Georgia was his son that had died, because not only Georgia was lying in that grave. Death played tricks on people at times. It let a person walk around and everybody thought they was alive when really they was dead. Jake had died with Georgia. Adams knew it.

The cemetery smelled sweet, with the scent of something ancient. It started to rain. Adams walked slowly through the cold rain to his battered car. He drove slowly like a man reluctant to leave. He surveyed the cemetery like a man with all the time in the world. He took his time, he wasn't ever coming out to this cemetery again, not even to visit the grave of Jake's mother. A feeling knifed through him as cold as the rain.

17

ARMENTA COULD NOT believe her eyes, she simply couldn't. They had found narcotics in Jake's car. A state trooper named Clint Garth had found it. It was right before her eyes, she had to believe it, her mother had written it was so. Her mother said it was disgusting and to forget about Jake, her father had been right all along. She felt sick, misery in her stomach. She hoped her roommate did not come in and start talking to her like she always did. She wished she had her old roommate back. Mabel never talked to her when she saw she wasn't in the talking mood. But ever since Grace had moved in after Mabel dropped out of school to get married — and that had raised quite a few eyebrows — Grace would come in and talk all night long, she knew she

would. Oh, Jake. How could she love something like that? But she hadn't known, yes she had. She had known all along. She had known something was wrong. That had been part of the fascination, part of what had made it thrilling being Jake Adams' girl. God, don't let me love you any more, like I do now. Jake, why don't you run away with me; we'll go somewhere where there's no one but us — oh, Jake, what are we going to do now?

The buzzer to her room was ringing. That was her intern wanting to take her out again. "I'm not in," she said through the speaker.

"Girl, don't be silly," a voice came back through the speaker at her.

"I don't want to see anybody."

"You want me to tell him that?"

"I don't care what you tell him."

"What's the matter, you sick?"

"Tell him to leave me alone," Armenta said. She lay across the bed and smothered her face in the pillow. She wished she was a little girl again, because that was the way she felt, and she was too big to feel like that. She heard the door open, the light frisky steps, and tried to ignore the sounds she knew were coming. The high voice of her roommate assailed her. She couldn't, didn't want to understand anything her roommate was saying, but she could not escape that high grating voice. The voice set her teeth on edge, like rubbing a saw against concrete.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," Armenta murmured. None of your damn business, she thought.

"I saw your guy down in the hall; he looked kind of peeved. You all been spatting again? What's the matter, don't you hear good?"

"I don't feel like talking."

"Your guy is sure smooth. I bet you're in love with him, that's what's wrong with you. No answer, huh? I thought so, I thought that's what was wrong. I bet — "

"Please, Grace."

"Armenta Arnez, you're just snooty, that's what's wrong with you. I've been knowing it all the time. Don't think I don't notice how you act all uppity when I talk to you. You're just like all those other high yellow gals with long hair, think you're cute — "

"Grace."

"Yeh, think you're cute. Well we dark-skinned gals can get a man too."

She had to go down to that newsstand and get a home-town paper every day, so she would know what was going on. She knew her parents weren't going to say anything more about it.

"Yeh, get with that ole light-skinned boy friend of yours. Think you so smart."

"Grace — "

"Yeh, notice you ain't never gave no dark-skinned boy a tumble, got to be real light to crawl up on you, well — "

"Grace, shut the hell up before I throttle you!" Armenta said hoarsely.

Grace saw the look in Armenta's eyes and backed away. She backed out of the door and slammed it shut.

"Oh, Jake," Armenta said. She buried her head in the pillow, but to her surprise she found out she could not cry.

MAXINE DANCED before the crowd, moisture in her eyes sparkling in the spotlights. Jake was a heel all the way down the line. She gave a big smile to Evelyn and Spider, who had finally managed to come out and catch her. Evelyn was showing a little, she thought. That guy from New York was here too, but he thought he was city slick. Well, he would learn this was a big city too; he wasn't going to get to her on a humbug. He wasn't going to get anything until she had that contract, sealed, signed, and delivered, with a certified guarantee. Yeh, she was young, with stars in her eyes, but a long ways from being a lame. He must have really thought she was a hick chick to think she'd go for that frone line he handed her.

Come up to my place and audition for me and I'll see what I can do. He was damn right he would see what he could do. In fact, he would do for her before he saw anything, let alone do what he wanted to do. So Scar was a junkie and Jake was a pusher. Life was sure full of laughs.

The club filled with applause for Maxine. She walked down off the stage and joined Spider and Evelyn at their table.

"You were great, girl," Evelyn said. "I'm so proud of you."

"I can tell by the way you're all swelled up," Maxine said.

*Spider laughed.

"We're expecting in September," Evelyn said. "Maxine, you'll just never know how it is until you get married an' carry one around."

"I don't guess you'll be doing that soon," Spider said.

"Naw, Spider. I don't know even one exciting man any more. The earth must have swallowed them all up."

"You're too busy to notice," Spider said. "I reckon that spotlight means more to you than any man ever has."

"Any man?"

"Yeh."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. It's kinda struck me that you done changed some, Maxine. Not saying that it ain't all to the good, but you done changed."

"In what way?"

"You look like success now, you know what I mean? Last year, you looked like you wanted success. Now you look like you got it."

"She has," Evelyn said.

"Yeh, that's right," Spider said smiling. "See the difference?"

"I'm afraid not," Maxine said.

"Well, you feel about the stage like me and Evelyn feel about each other, like the stage is a person to you. You ain't never cared about no boy like that, you get me?"

"That's right," Evelyn agreed.

"Yeh, that sure is right," Maxine agreed. She even smiled.

Spider could have told them he visited Jake in the hospital, but he didn't. Somehow he felt neither Evelyn or Maxine wanted to know. Jake had not been very talkative. He seemed kind of funny. Spider could not put his finger on just what it was. He was not the same stud somehow. Man, he sure hoped he could beat that narcotics rap. Maybe Monk could fix it. He hoped so.

OLD MAN ADAMS rubbed his heavy eyes. He wondered what Pop thought now.

POLICE EXPECT TO CRACK DOPE RING — *The car driven by teen-ager Jake Adams, Negro, in which Georgia Garveli lost her life, revealed . . .*

Adams rubbed his eyes, his days going by in headlines.

POLICE COMMISSIONER SAYS TEEN-AGE CRIME TO BE DEALT WITH STERNLY —

D.A. SAYS CITY BREEDS TEEN-AGE CRIME THROUGH KID GLOVE HANDLING BY COURT OFFICIALS —

ADAMS SAYS GEORGIA WAS SISTER?

TEEN-AGER PAWN IN HANDS OF RUTHLESS ORGANIZATION —

POLICE SAY POSSESSION OF NARCOTICS NOT ONLY CRIME?

JAKE ADAMS TRIAL DELAYED BY VANDALS — *Vital evidence that was to be used against Jake Adams was reported missing —*

The city was exciting again. It was fun to be alive.

HE HAD NOT RIDDEN in a squad car in years, not since three years ago when they had picked him up for some studs to identify as the leader of the gang that had wasted them. The guys had been afraid to finger him. They knew who they had to get along with. Well, he was going down again. Yeh, it didn't matter anyway. He didn't care what happened to him; he didn't give a damn what they did. Georgia was dead, wasn't she? He wondered if Armenta knew. Yeh, her old man would have been the first to let her know. She had written him every day he was in the hospital up until last week, up until his name hit the headlines again with a big splash. Man, he sure got to be a big shot around here all of a sudden, writing all those words about him. Why'd you have to pick me for your brother? That's what killed you, Georgia. Monk said don't say a damn thing, when his lawyer got through with the D.A. he wouldn't even be able to prove the junk was found in his car. Just keep your crumb crushers shut, Monk said. Don't even listen when the guy grills you. Play hopscotch on the ceiling with your eyes, anything. Monk didn't have to worry none about him, he wasn't going to say nothing. Monk had treated him real straight; what kind of stud did Monk think he was that would go against him like that? *I'm with you, Monk.* Monk knew that. He made a mistake on that Trashwagon guy though. Jake wondered how could Monk make a mistake like that? But, he should have told Monk about Trashwagon. It was his fault, not Monk's. Yeh, it was his fault about everything, that's why he didn't care. He didn't have anything to care about anyway. His girl was down on him, his best friend quitting it without saying anything. Spider coming to see him one time. One time, how did you like that? The T's

didn't even drop in. He did not blame them though, he knew why. They were scared by all that newspaper hot air about teen-age gangs and things. He could understand them but he could not understand Spider, Scar. Fugg it, such is life in the big city. Man, what he needed was a big eraser to erase that last month and start all over again. He sure wouldn't do the same thing the second time around.

The police officers, riding in the car with Jake, kidded each other. They paid no attention to him. They locked him up in a cell by himself. He tried to get comfortable on the bunk which was made of a flat metal hard as steel. The bunk would not give to the contours of his body. It was uncomfortable as hell, too uncomfortable to sleep even. He didn't give a damn.

21

THE SMALL, BLACK-HAIRED man paced back and forth across the room. He had the kind of eyes they said criminals have, but Jake did not see them very often because the little man kept his back to him.

"You know what a spot you're in?"

He had been saying that forever it seemed to Jake though it could not possibly have been any longer than ten minutes. The small man whirled and pointed a rigid finger at Jake, his mouth came open, then closed. He turned his back to Jake and started pacing again. *What the hell is this anyway?*

"You know what a spot you're in?"

Don't say a word, not a damn thing, that's what Monk said.

"You know what a penitentiary is like? You think that one day you spent in a cell was something? You think it's glamorous like the movies? Don't believe that bunk, it's hell, it's hell, boy! You know what a spot you're in? That's right, sit there not saying anything. You think it's smart protecting somebody, being loyal. Well, those days are going to be just as loyal to you. Every drab day you spend behind those walls is going to be loyal. All of them are going to come around and massage you with drudgery, until your mind goes as cruddy as those prison walls. Does that sound so glamorous to you? Oh, I know, you're young, you think you can take anything. You think you're proud and that serving time will be a challenge. Well, maybe it will for the first few days, maybe even the first few weeks, if you're really proud. But pretty soon the challenge is going to disappear because you're not going to know what you're fighting any more. All you're going to be able to see are those days ticking away slowly like a faulty clock without a minute hand so that you're not even sure that the time is passing although you know it has to be. You know what a spot you're in?" The little man turned to look at Jake and caught the blank expression. The pacing resumed on rubber-heeled shoes. "You can't beat this rap by clamming up, did your friend tell you that? We've got you. We've got you cold. We don't need evidence, we don't need anything not even a trial. You're hooked, boy, just as sure as those junkies you peddle to are hooked. So sit there — sit there if you want to and not say anything, be glamorous. I guarantee you one thing, there's no glamour in prison. There's no uniqueness, no personality differentiation. You're all the same in prison, it's a perfect system of indiscrimination, you should like that. Time weighs on you like a yoke around your neck. It bows your head, cuts nervous ticks in your face, withers the spine

taking all your manhood away, dries up the brain — You know they don't have any women in jail, boy! No kind of women, black or *white*. What are you going to do about that?"

CALDONIA —

"You know what being without a woman does to a man? Always been able to get your share, haven't you? Well, what are you going to do all those years you spend in prison? You ever hear that joke — masturbation is the dearth of a nation? Humph! That's right, sit there not saying a word. Get used to time, you're going to have plenty of time to get used to."

The pacing back and forth, the little man blurring before his eyes. Monk had warned him what it would be like.

"A man's pride has always been his downfall. You're kind of young to be making that mistake," the little man said in a weary voice almost as if he felt sorry for Jake.

Jake thrilled to the voice, the voice was destruction and he was invincible. He shifted to a more comfortable position in the chair, forcing the indifferent look to remain on his face. This guy would get tired after a while, then he could go back to the cell where everybody would leave him alone.

"You know what a spot you're in? You ready to talk now?" The little man stopped pacing and stood calmly before Jake with a look on his face that did more to Jake than anything he had said. Jake felt like a mouse being played with by a cat. "What good is loyalty? Can it erase time? Can it give you back the years you spend in prison, can you go to bed with it, breathe it, eat it? Can it melt those walls between you and the outside world? I thought you were smart. You would think a guy as young as you in your racket would have to be smart, but you're dumb, you're nothing but a dumb-assed nigger!"

Jake's stomach knotted up. He held his head up as if he

was the proudest son-of-a-bitch in the world, with an arrogant message written in his eyes. The guy was trying to make him mad, goad him into saying something he would be sorry for. He was a stupid bastard to think he would fall for something as lame as that.

"You like white women, don't you boy? I bet Georgia was good. She was the best lay you ever had, wasn't she? You'd trade your life to get next to her again —"

Force it down, keep that look there. That was your defense, keep it there no matter what. To hell with what that son-of-a-bitch said. Keep it down, don't let him get you! Monk had said it would be rough, but Jim! Jake shifted in the chair, planted his feet against the floor.

"You don't like that, do you? You can't fool me with that unconcerned face of yours. I know what you're calling me in your mind. Well, you're going to be calling the whole state a son-of-a-bitch before this thing blows over, that I promise you." The little man turned from Jake and paced the floor again. "You know, these are just the preliminaries, but you're not even in them, you just think you are. You were kayoed when the opening bell went off in the qualifying rounds. O.K.," he said matter-of-factly. "Let's quit holding out on each other, huh?" He turned and faced Jake, his eyebrows knitted. "Does that surprise you? You think you're the only one holding out around here? Boy, you are dumb. I'll level with you." The finger shot out. "If you're smart, you'll level with me."

"Can I have a smoke?" Jake said indifferently.

The eyebrows knitted again. "Oh, so you can talk." The little man handed a cigarette to Jake and lit one for himself. "Did they tell you we beat people with rubber hoses and all that kind of rot, boy? It's a lie of course. We treat people humanely, you know that now, don't you? See how nice we

are? Humph!” The little man settled on top of the desk beside Jake and crossed his legs. “Look, son, we don’t want you, we want Monk. You’re just a scrap that can be thrown to the junkpile or salvaged, all depending on you. So you keep quiet, what does that get you, ten, twenty, thirty years. You turn state’s evidence, you could get a pardon, maybe. A probation, parole, being a minor and all, you know?”

“Thanks for the smoke,” Jake said.

“What about the parole?”

“I’m a dumb-assed nigger, remember?”

“You’ve got it all figured out, haven’t you. You think you’re riding high on that baloney Monk fed you. Monk told you he could get you off, didn’t he? I know what he told you, I know how those jokers work. That’s what he told you, but he can’t do it, and he knows it. He can’t do it any more than I can put out a forest fire by pissing in it! You feel secure because you think you’re going to court to answer charges for possessing narcotics. We’re bringing a charge of rape against you along with that narcotics possession rap; that is, unless you play along with me.”

“You’re crazy!” Jake said.

“You’d better listen to me,” the small man said. “You’re the one who’s crazy. I’m going to get Monk, even if it means throwing you to the wolves. Your loyalty means nothing. It just prevents you from saving your own hide, so don’t fool yourself.”

“You can’t get me on no phony charges like that,” Jake said. “I know my rights.”

“You can save the bravado for the spectators in court, you’re wasting it on me.”

“I didn’t do nothing like those charges.”

“Your name and Georgia’s will look good in print,” the little man said matter-of-factly.

"Leave Georgia out of this."

"It's up to you."

"What you got to drag Georgia into it for?"

"Have another cigarette. You look like you want to get excited and that would ruin the no-hitter you've been pitching all evening."

"You can't prove no charges like that!"

"We can prove you were in the park before you went out on the highway."

That dirty son-of-a-bitch, that dirty, skinny-faced, knotty-skinned, park cop son-of-a-bitch!

"We have a sworn statement about what happened in the park."

"It wasn't rape. It wasn't nothing like rape!"

"I've got a statement saying it was."

"You're crazy!"

"Am I?"

"Nobody would believe nothing crazy as that."

"Don't fool yourself, boy. All I've got to tell that court is that you raped that *white* girl in the seat of your *Cadillac* and the case is mine. You'd better open your clams and talk. It doesn't matter whether you raped her or not. All the evidence pro and con will reveal one thing that's going to crucify you in that courtroom — you and Georgia were intimate with each other. That'll get you sent up for thirty years. You can get that for narcotics possession if the judge and the jury don't like you. How do you think they're going to feel about you and Georgia?"

Jake did not answer. He was too angry, too unnerved, too incoherent in his thoughts to say anything.

"Look, I'm a white man, but I'm not prejudiced, at least I don't think I am. You just happen to be the most important case that ever came my way. I'm not out to get you

because I'm prejudiced. Just like I told you, I'm willing to help you get out of it. But if I have to throw you to the wolves to get Monk, then that's where you're going. I'd do it no matter what color you were. But a lot of people sitting out in that courtroom aren't going to be like me. They're emotional, they sway to anything if it's odious enough. This isn't Mississippi, but it's going to seem like it to you at times in that courtroom."

"You dizzy ofay prick," Jake hissed. "You're crazy. You're crazy, you're crazy!"

The little man could get nothing else out of Jake. He called in two guards. They took Jake back to his cell.

"Who's the messenger in this dump?" Jake said.

"You act like you don't like it here," one of the guards said. "What's the matter, you want to go home?"

"You act like you ain't got no home," Jake said.

"A tough guy."

"Yeh, most of 'em are limp as dishwater when the D.A. gets through with 'em," the other guard said. "I guess we got a problem child on our hands."

"I want to see my lawyer," Jake said.

"A real problem child."

"I want to see my lawyer, I know my rights."

"The man knows his rights."

"I want to see my lawyer and Monk. I want to see Monk right away," Jake said quietly, very quietly.

"Who's Monk?"

"Mortimer Newhouser," the other guard said. "The miracle man, the man who makes manna rain from heaven."

"Who's the messenger in this dump?"

"Keep your shirt on boy, you ain't going nowhere, not for a long time."

"Yeh, you got plenty of time, about ten years I'd say."

"The D.A.'s riding for Governor on your case, boy. He's going to take real good care of you. You're a blessing in disguise."

Jake ignored the guards, drew into himself. He ground his teeth together, longing for just one stick of tea. He wasn't worried. Monk would fix it. Monk could fix anything.

22

ADAMS TO STAND TRIAL FOR RAPE AND NARCOTICS POSSESSION —

Peabody Avenue was quiet, waiting for the trial. Junkies along Welch Street, with huddled eyes, crowded out of their hiding places seeking their daily subsistence now extremely difficult to get. Now the weather was warm and lazy, sunlight the kind that caught the metal of skate wheels and made them sparkle. It was spring without rain, a pleasant time of year.

The courtroom was crowded. The judge sat in the high chair overlooking his domain, his obese body inclosed within the dignity of a solemn gown. The judge forced dignity into the courtroom with a quiet voice laden with authority. Along the front bench the reporters stood ready with loaded cameras.

Jake was in a daze. He saw and didn't see. He heard without any of the words registering. The jury was all one face — white. Once he had looked behind him, right into the eyes of his father and Pop and Mrs. Garveli. After that, he kept his eyes to the front. Monk had deserted him, Monk of all

people. He couldn't figure that, Monk quitting it. Monk had turned chicken, deserted him to save his own skin. The calm expression, on Jake's face, portraying his indifference, infuriated the pacing D.A., fascinated the jury, and held the courtroom in the grip of shuffling emotions. Somewhere in the misty distance the voices of legal machinery in motion registered vaguely on his self-willed shell.

"Your name, please?"

"Michael Marachy."

"Do you swear —"

Such is life in the big city . . .

"Do you know the defendant?"

"I do."

"Will you tell the court when and under what circumstances you came to know the defendant?"

"Well, it was around ten o'clock. I was patrolling the park as usual —"

Monk can fix anything.

"Well, like I said, I thought there was something suspicious about that Cadillac being parked out there so I went over and flashed my light inside to investigate."

"And what did you find, when you flashed your light into the car, the *Cadillac* of the defendant?"

"Objection, your honor, the phraseology used by the District Attorney is obviously aimed at arousing prejudice toward —"

"Your honor, I —"

"Objection overruled," the judge said arbitrarily.

"When you flashed your light into the defendant's ahumrph, *Cadillac* —"

MAN, I'm busting my cap. Easy, Scar. My wig is split . . .

"Well, they were, they were —"

"They were what, Mr. Marachy? What were they doing?"

the impatient District Attorney said to the embarrassed park policeman.

"They were, well, you know. They were having sex relations."

Voices exploding deep in the throats of the courtroom with the speed of a sputtering machine gun.

"Order in the court." The pounding gavel.

"And what did you do?"

The reaction of the court had filled the park policeman with self-righteous self-assurance. "I told that son-of-a — I told that guy to get the hell up from there!" An explosion of guttural comments sandwiched between veiled snickers. The judge giving the District Attorney a look of disapproval, pounding order back in the court with a gavel.

"Well, I can tell you, I started to take out my pistol and be —"

"Arhumph, Mr. Marachy, please, let's just stick to what you did do."

"Well, it was a clear case of rape, but I didn't arrest the guy because the girl wouldn't co-operate."

"Oh."

"Yeh. She wouldn't press charges; she said she didn't want no trouble. Name in the paper and all of that. You see she lived in a colored neighborhood and, well — that would just make matters worse, you see what I mean?"

"I see. Now tell me, who is the person that committed this loathsome — this — are you positive who this criminal —"

"Objection!"

"I withdraw the statement. Are you positive who this poor, misled, unfortunate —"

Spider's going to be a cripple for the rest of his life, can you fix that, Jake?

"Will you tell the jury who this poor, misunderstood, downtrodden, persecuted —"

"Objection!"

Monk can fix anything . . .

"Who was this man?"

"That guy sitting right over there!" Flash bulbs exploding on the policeman rising from his chair and pointing an accusing finger at Jake.

This is goodbye, Jake, that's what I was trying to tell you all along . . .

"Order in the court, order!"

"Your witness."

The Counsel for the Defense walked toward Officer Marachy with a look of complete disgust upon his face. He looked at the jury as if he were asking them was it necessary to refute the ridiculous accusations brought by the policeman.

"Now, Mr. Parakeet —" He paused at the reaction on Marachy's face. "That is your name, isn't it?"

"Marachy, *Ma-ra-chy*."

"Oh, yes. I most humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Parakeet, now tell me — oh did I mispronounce your name again? I'm sorry, but tell me, if my client is guilty of committing the act you say he did, why you did not arrest him."

"I told you."

"Oh, you did?"

"I told the whole court."

"Oh, would you mind repeating it again, and I'll promise to pay closer attention this time."

"The girl wouldn't prosti — persecute!" the ruffled officer said.

"Oh, the girl wouldn't persecute?"

"Prosti — prosecute, she wouldn't *prosecute*, that's what I said!"

"Oh, I see. Now tell me, Mr. Marachy, how long have you been a member of the police force of this city?"

"Seven years," the officer said proudly.

"Then you know that the committing of a carnal act in public is against the law?"

"Well, I —"

"Come now, Mr. Marachy, don't tell me that the police force keeps personnel in its employ who are not familiar with the laws they are authorized to enforce?"

"Well, no, I mean —"

"Are you or are you not familiar with the law, Mr. Marachy?"

"Yes."

"And you are positive Georgia Garveli was raped by my client?"

"Yes."

"And you condoned that action by allowing my client to go free?"

"No, the girl wouldn't prosecute, I told you that."

"Oh, the girl wouldn't prosecute. Then what makes you so sure it was rape?"

"Well, it's obvious, I mean no white girl would let — I mean —"

"At any time did you hear a scream of protest, or see any sign of a struggle or any outward sign that a rape was taking place?"

"The girl was afraid, I told you that."

"Oh, she was afraid of him, but they were committing an act of passion?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Marachy do you approve of Negroes dating white girls?"

"Well, I don't see what —"

"Just answer the question, Mr. Marachy."

The red-faced officer squirms and wiggles in his chair while a cool, composed appearing Jake Adams is torn to pieces on the inside.

"Would you approve of your daughter, your neighbor's daughter or your friend's daughter going out with a Negro?"

"No."

"Yet you expect us to believe that you caught Jake Adams committing a carnal act with Georgia Garveli and did nothing about it?"

"Well, I explained to you —"

"You don't approve of your daughter or your neighbor's daughter associating with Negroes and yet you would condone sexual relations between the races, is that what you would expect us to believe Mr. Marachy?"

"Well, no. I mean —"

"Yet you failed to arrest Georgia Garveli and Jake Adams on a misdemeanor charge which you believe in your mind to be rape though you have no tangible evidence to support your suspicions?"

"Well, I —"

"Mr. Marachy, do you realize what you are saying? You are insisting that you are a negligent officer who fails to carry out his duties, which you may very well be, but when you insist that you would consider the effect an arrest would have on parents who would permit their daughter to carry on activities you are definitely opposed to, I'm afraid you stretch the credulity of the court beyond the limits of its imagination. Now, isn't it true, Mr. Marachy, that all of these absurd charges are figments of your imagination?"

"No! I tell you I caught that guy in the car with that girl!" Marachy shouted.

"The court is not having a hard time hearing you, Mr.

Marachy, just believing you. That's all, you may step down now."

Damn, he was impressed. He couldn't be more impressed if Monk was God . . .

The murmur in the courtroom, the face of the jury.

"Your honor, I request a recess for —"

"Your honor, I object!"

"Your honor, it appears to me —"

"Your honor!"

"May I have a word with your honor without the District Attorney's consent?"

Do you love me, Jake? Will you write me, will you write me, Jake?

"Recess granted."

"Your honor!"

"Court adjourned until nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

Monk could fix it. Monk could fix anything . . .

23

OFFICER ACCUSES ADAMS OF RAPING GEORGIA GARVELI IN CAR — Confusion muddled the brain of old man Adams. He was responsible, he knew that, but it did not solve anything. Sure, he knew what everyone was saying, if he had been firmer, ruled Jake with more of an iron hand it wouldn't have happened. He was not so sure it was as simple as that. He had known plenty of kids to go bad who had been ruled with iron hands, preachers' sons even. Naw, iron hand ruling wasn't it, and just letting them drift along wasn't it either. What was, that was the point, what was? You could mix it up

anyway you wanted to, iron hand or slack, and some kid was still going to get into trouble. He knew that, he had seen it happen enough to know. Yet, it was his responsibility, parents were responsible, you couldn't get away from that. But, what the hell could you do? What was the right combination to keep them straight? Adams didn't know. He was pretty sure no one else knew the answer either, but the thought was not consoling. He was acting like a coward he knew, but he could not go back into that courtroom. After all, a man had only so much heart.

24

HEADLINES STARED at Mr. Arnez from the floor where the paper lay in a heap. Mrs. Arnez lay on the couch trying to work yesterday's crossword puzzle, but she could not hold interest and laid it aside.

"Henry," Mrs. Arnez finally said.

"Yes."

"You going to write —"

Henry Arnez shook his head. "I don't believe that guy raped that girl. I believe he would do a lot of things, but I don't believe that."

"Are you —"

"I'm not going to write her anything about it."

"She likes him a lot, Henry."

"I know it."

"I —"

"Let's forget about him, like she's got to do."

The comedian on the radio was at his rollicking best, but nobody heard him.

EVELYN CARESSED her hard, growing stomach. She imagined she could feel it moving in her. She knew it was just imagination though. Her eyes smarted with sympathy for Spider, as she glanced over to his side of the bed and saw his face, rigid and troubled in sleep. Spider had insisted his back was hurting him too much to go to work, but Evelyn knew what was wrong with him. She wished that there was something she could tell him, something she could do to make him feel better, but she knew she couldn't. This was something he would have to get over by himself. She had felt funny going into the back of that place where all that gambling was going on to tell Carl that Spider was sick. She didn't understand how Spider could stand it. She did not really know Spider, she realized. Spider wasn't like those people in that back room, not even like Carl. She believed that with all her heart. She had to keep him from becoming like that by making it nice at home for him. That was what wives were for, wasn't it? She had to hold on to Spider, she had to. Spider and the baby, that was her life. They had to stay together and away from places like Elm Street. She had been afraid they were not going to ever get away from that, but they had. Now they had to hang on to what they had, no matter what happened. She had to make Spider see that. She would talk to him about it, not now, but sometime when what happened to Jake would be long ago. That would come. You didn't think it would, but it would come, and Spider would get over it. She knew he would. She looked at the muscles cramping his face while he slept. He had to. Lord, dear God, she prayed, whatever happens, don't let our baby grow up to be a Jake!

HE READ all about it on a bench in the train station. It was true all right, Jake was in real trouble. His face felt tight. He was weak; he felt like someone he had never known. He walked through the huge train station outside to the taxi stand. He was hungry, but could not stand the thought of food. He was tired and sleepy, but he knew he would not be able to go to sleep. It was like someone had locked him up in a room all by himself for about a hundred years. A stud could go crazy like that.

"Where to, Jack?" the cab driver said.

"Fourteen Hundred Welch." He did not remember the ride. All he remembered was getting out of the cab and scraping up fare for the driver. Arm and arm in intoxicated enthusiasm couples patrolled the bars along Welch Street. Gangs of teen-agers crowded the sidewalk singing boogie-jogie music at the top of their voices. *The good ole days* . . . A mongrel dog scouted the street, then dashed bravely between weaving cars to cross to the other side. The dog darted into the gangway by Booker's pool hall. He wouldn't find nothing to eat around there. Molly's looked like it was closed. He wondered what had happened. She had the downest jukebox in town. One of the electric bulbs was out over Judiheimer's. That was where Spider had — He wondered if Red's clothes were still in there. Red was a nice stud, too bad — Her name was still in neon over the Paradise. He took a deep breath, then plunged inside. The place was not lighted very well and he appreciated that, but when he found a seat the lights up over the mirror, behind the bar, hurt his eyes. He ordered a beer which he didn't touch. People were dancing up on the stage with no daylight between. It was crowded on the stage, but no one seemed to mind. The band

did not sound good, but no one seemed to mind that either. The band stopped playing and the yellow lights from over the balcony hit the stage. The people looked diffused under the light, almost as if they were swimming under water. That was the cue for the last show. After that things became confusing. Man, now he knew how a rundown battery felt without a charge. He saw her dancing in one of those tough costumes and that made everything crazy for a while. After that things sort of blacked out.

"Hi Scar."

Scar stared up into the puzzled eyes of Maxine. "Oh, hi," he said. He tried to smile, but his face would not co-operate.

"I asked you where you been?"

"Sorry, I didn't hear you."

"You sick?"

Scar nodded his head.

"Bad?"

Scar nodded again.

"You're not —"

"Naw, I wanted to see you, but I seemed — everything fell apart."

"You're lucky. I usually go right out the back door after the last show, but I came over for a drink — Scar, you on the cure?" Maxine asked, her eyes going soft.

Scar nodded.

"It's bad, isn't it?"

"That ain't the half of it."

"Come on," Maxine said. "Let's not talk any more around here." She had to help Scar. It scared her; he had been so strong. He looked like he had lost at least twenty pounds. "Where you been, everyone's been looking for you?"

"Lexington."

"Was it —"

"It's hell, I need a woman," Scar said. "I need someone bad, not like — you know. I need someone to talk to. I gotta hold onto something, something solid, that don't melt away when you need it." He looked at Maxine. "I'm sorry, you don't dig what I mean."

"Yes, I do," Maxine said, a sinking feeling pushing at her stomach.

"I got to talk. Just talk and talk and talk," Scar said.

Maxine hailed a taxi. "Where you staying, Scar?"

"I just got in tonight, I ain't got nowhere." Scar smiled weakly. "I ain't even got no bread. I came back after hearing about Jake — baby, I'm tore up, and I don't mean floating," Scar said.

"You can stay with me," Maxine said. "That way, that damn Russell will quit hounding me. That bastard don't dare fire me, I draw too many people and a lot of other places in town want me." She looked at Scar sitting beside her in the cab. She could see he had not been listening to a word she said.

She undressed Scar and gave him a bath. She didn't think much about it. Scar had gotten skinny. She got him in a pair of pajamas Russell had left and was relieved to see him go right to sleep. She got a funny feeling about being in bed with Scar. She did not worry about that either.

"IS IT THE CUSTOM of the State to perform an autopsy on accident victims in this state?"

"It is."

"And did you perform an autopsy on Georgia Garveli?"

"I did."

"Will you tell the court what the autopsy revealed?"

"Yes, I will. When I examined — " The words again, the pulsating beat of words. The eyes of the jury watching him, the discord rising in the courtroom.

"Then, the autopsy revealed that Miss Garveli definitely was criminally attacked?"

"I wouldn't say that. An act of copulation took place, yes."

"I see. That's all, thank you." The triumphant look at the Counsel for the Defense.

"No cross examination."

The murmuring courtroom.

"Your name please."

"Clint — Clint Garth."

"Do you swear — "

He was expecting that. He knew Trashwagon would be out to get him. The jury was no longer watching him, they were watching Trashwagon. Trashwagon was putting on a show, the down-home son-of-a-bitch.

"Now, will you tell the jury what you — "

"Sure, ah be glad ta," Clint said, cutting the District Attorney off. "Now, if things wasn't lak dey are up here — "

"Objection."

"Objection sustained."

"Mr. Garth, will you first confine your comments to what occurred on the night of — "

"Dat nigger killed ah white woman, dat's what happened!"

"Objection!"

"Objection sustained." The irritated judge pounded the gavel while flash bulbs bathed Clint Garth. And where was Jake Adams when all this was going on? Out in the sun-

light, in the Dynaflo across the street from the school, shooting the bull with the fellows, looking at the babes with big stockings —

"The reason dat white gal got herself killed was 'cause that nig — " The rumble in the courtroom, the groan from the tired overworked judge. " — dat *guy* was speeding!"

That was a lie. That was a damn lie . . .

"Dat *guy* *was* speeding. He was going so fast we didn't have to clock him. Well, when he tried to slow down for that curve — "

"That's a lie . . . That's a lie!" Jake said through clinched teeth.

"He killed dat gal!" Clint screamed. "Dat's what happens when ya don't keep 'em in place. All dey want is ta slick dey hair back, drive a Cadillac and get a white — "

"Objection, your honor!"

Flash bulbs exploding in a room of ugly faces. The judge sighed wearily and charged Clint Garth with contempt of court and ordered a recess until nine the following morning.

All the way out of the courtroom Jake felt eyes turning his way. *At times that courtroom is going to seem like Mississippi . . .*

ADAMS CALLS GARTH LIAR —

GARTH TESTIFIES HE FOUND NARCOTICS ON FLOOR OF ADAMS' CAR —

Ralph Jenkins, the tall, slim, dignified appearing Counsel

for the Defense, looked at Jake inquisitively. "Snap out of it, kid."

"Snap out of what?"

The lawyer strolled over to the door and closed it. "Look, I've been paid and paid well to acquit you, not defend you, acquit you. You understand that?"

"I'll bet."

"What's wrong?"

"Aw, hell, what difference does it make?"

"You're feeling sorry for yourself."

"Naw, I ain't. I ain't feeling one way or the other. I ain't feeling period. I don't care."

"Well, other people care."

"What other people? You think my old man cares, or Pop and Mrs. Garveli having to listen to all that dirt about Georgia and me? Naw, don't nobody care, not my friends even. Don't nobody care but the D.A. and Trashwagon and all those studs out to get me."

"And why let them do it?"

"What's the dif?"

"How do you know no one cares?"

"Aw, you wouldn't understand."

"Well, I understand this Monk —"

"The hell with Monk, he was a hell of a friend running out —"

"Is that what's eating you?"

"What you mean?"

"So you think Monk ran out on you. Would I be here if he had run out on you? Don't you know this town is loaded with Feds? Don't you know this town is so hot that nothing white is moving in it except sugar, and I mean the real stuff? What did you expect Monk to do, stick around and commit suicide?"

Jake had nothing to say.

"Look kid, this is an easy case."

"Easy, yeah."

"You just follow instructions and say what I told you when you get on the stand."

"That the dope belonged to Georgia, in other words."

"They can't prove it belonged to you. Don't you understand that? It was found in your car, that doesn't mean it belonged to you. Their case isn't worth a dime unless they can prove the stuff was found on you. Why do you think I spent so much time cross-examining Clint Garth. There were two people in the car — you and Georgia. Georgia isn't around to prove that the stuff didn't belong to her."

"No, but I am."

"Look, get ahold of yourself."

"What you got to keep dragging Georgia into it for?"

"What's the matter with you, don't you want to beat this rap?"

"I can't let you keep doing that to Georgia."

"You're going soft."

"Naw, I ain't. I can take anything that's coming to me."

"Now look —"

"Fuggit," Jake said.

"What do you think Monk's going to think if you —"

"I don't care what Monk thinks. He's a hell of a pal, wanting me to lay all that dirt on Georgia to get out of something she didn't have nothing to do with."

"It's your only chance, kid."

"Fuggit."

"If we don't play that angle the D.A. will tear you apart in that courtroom."

"Fuggit."

The lawyer sighed.

Jake bet Armenta was sleeping with somebody; it served him right. The dope didn't belong to Georgia.

29

THE GRAY-TEMPLED Counsel for the Defense strolled casually over to the jury box after the District Attorney rested his case. "The State rests its case," he said contemptuously. "Pardon me, ladies and gentlemen, but the State does not have a case. My client is not being prosecuted, he is being persecuted and I would like to ask the court here and now if this farce being conducted is supposed to be a trial of justice or a mistrial of prejudice. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this case is the most poorly prepared and the charges more ludicrous than any I have ever seen presented before a court in all my seventeen years as a member of the bar!"

Crossing blades with words, verbal fencing, and the pounding gavel.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, can you even imagine a man like Officer Marachy not arresting Jake Adams if he had suspected him of committing what he has been accused of?"

The murmur in the courtroom. Jake Adams, looking indifferently at his surroundings, catching the eyes of the Garvelis and avoiding them, searching the room, not knowing what he was looking for and then seeing Maxine and Scar watching him from a bench in the back. That floored him, that really knocked him out. Scar grinned and winked at him. Almost without knowing it he winked back. Cameras caught him, he was feeling good, it seemed for the first time

in his life. The Counsel for the Defense presenting documents to the judge and requesting the case be thrown out of court. The District Attorney and his assistants getting their heads in a huddle.

SMUG ADAMS WINKS AT COURTROOM —

They had the pictures to prove it. It went over big, real big.

30

DARK STORMY DAYS raining headlines.

ADAMS CASE TO CONTINUE —

YOUNG ADAMS TAKES STAND TODAY —

ADAMS DENIES ANY CONNECTION WITH
MORTIMER NEWHOUSER —

Thundering headlines electrifying the city,

ADAMS ADMITS NARCOTICS NOT GEORGIA'S

ADAMS UNABLE TO EXPLAIN NARCOTICS
FOUND IN CAR —

ADAMS HAS CADILLAC AND NO JOB —

DEFIANT ADAMS STILL ABEL TO RAISE CAIN
ON EVE OF TRIAL'S END — *Jake Adams today accounted for his expensive car and wardrobe by saying he gambled and accepted gifts from friends. He appeared indifferent and defiant throughout the questioning . . .*

And the storm broke.

ADAMS TO FACE SENTENCING TODAY —

And the watered weeds bore fruit.

ADAMS DRAWS SEVEN YEARS FOR NARCOTICS POSSESSION —

And the raining headlines dried up, but the weeds they had cultivated grew.

On Peabody Avenue the gulf widened between the Garvelis and the neighborhood, a gulf cleaved by shame, misunderstanding, sympathy, and smoldering feelings too young to be diagnosed yet, but one thing was clear, the Garvelis were white, as white as all the white people in the world. Pop went about the grocery store functioning automatically. It was the same business, the same customers, and the Garvelis and the neighborhood were strangers. The Garvelis felt sorry for Jake, but who could understand that? They forgave him, why even they did not know. They would have moved away, but where was there to go? It would be even worse in a new neighborhood, and if they moved away, wouldn't their shame follow them? They had been happy in this neighborhood once. Now the neighborhood was uneasy. It would remain that way until a new generation grew up indifferent to the neighborhood legend that had just been born. Over on Welch Street the silent balls in Booker's began to click again.

SHE READ IT ALL, every word, line, syllable, comma, and period of it and it made her sick because Jake Adams was

guilty, more guilty than Judas had been when he double-crossed Jesus back there in the old days. How could you, Jake? How could you? You said you loved me. She blinked at the tears that refused to come. She believed she had been hurt too badly for tears, that had to be the reason she couldn't cry, didn't it? I never knew you at all, she thought. After all these years, I never really knew you. Now I'll never know you again. It's all over, there's nothing to hold on to any more. There would be someone else, she did not believe there would be though. Not like that, there would never be another like that. She might learn to like someone, but never, she vowed it, never again would she love someone like she had loved Jake Adams. It was funny, she had spent all this time wondering about there being a God when the simple truth was under her nose all along, because actually, I mean really it did not matter whether there was one or not. In fact, not much of anything mattered she realized dully. The tears fell. Tears fell and Armenta Arnez picked up her sweater and slipped it on. She went out of the dormitory to find her intern or someone else who liked her.

32

"HI SCAR," Maxine said coming in the door.

"Hi baby," Scar said.

"How you feel?"

"Not too good," Scar admitted.

"Well, another night, another buck."

"You read about Jake?"

"No, what's new?"

Scar passed the paper to her. The words smeared, it was like someone hitting her in the pit of her stomach with a sledgehammer. "He's had it, Scar."

"I know."

"Tough."

"Yeh, tough," Scar said.

"Scar, sometimes I wish I was back in grade school."

"You and me both," Scar said.

Maxine stretched lazily. "Help me with this zipper," she said, turning her back to him.

Scar's hands trembled as he unzipped the dress. It was not the intimacy, it was something more deadly than that.

"What's the matter?" Maxine said.

"Nothing."

At first Maxine thought it was the sight of her in black lace panties and brassière that had upset Scar, although she had been around him plenty of times like that before, but Scar was not even looking at her.

"Scar?"

Scar sprawled on the bed face downward doubling and undoubling his fists.

"Scar, you all right?"

Scar groaned.

"Scar, you are over the hump, aren't you? It's not like it was before, the way it was when you first came back?"

"No," Scar said.

"What's it like?"

"You can't describe it."

Maxine sat down on the bed beside Scar. "You can beat it, Scar, I know you can."

"Yeh," Scar said. He suddenly sat up. "I'm going for a walk," he said getting to his feet.

"Scar, you're not going looking for — "

"Naw, I just gotta walk for a while, that's all."

"Then I'm going too."

"At two in the morning?"

"You're walking on the same time."

"The whole world's walking on the same time and their steps are way off beat," Scar said. "You don't need to join the parade."

"Scar?"

"I'll be back."

"Let's go to bed, we'll talk about it in the morning."

"I've got to do something."

"Let's go to bed. Turn out the light," she said.

"Maxine, damn it, I'm not in a sleeping mood."

"Wouldn't you rather go to bed with me than go out walking?"

Scar turned off the light. When he crawled beneath the covers she was on his side of the bed waiting for him. He had never dreamed, not in all the dreams he had had about Maxine, that it could be like this.

"You're a strange guy," she told him later.

"How?"

"In all these nights you haven't ever tried to move over to my side of the bed."

"Would you have wanted me to?"

"No," she admitted.

"You mind if I tell you something?"

"I don't think so."

"I used to imagine how it would be in bed with you."

"And?"

"It was never like this."

Maxine blushed and turned away from him.

"I've been in love with you for years, but I never thought the day would come when —"

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Would it have done any good?"

"Humans really make a mess of things, don't they?" Maxine said snuggling back up to him.

"Yeh."

They had a good laugh about it.

"I was crazy about you in grade school, you didn't even notice, I bet," Maxine said rubbing her hands over his shoulders.

"Sure didn't," Scar admitted. Somehow that struck them as being funny also.

"I'm glad you stayed on your side of the bed."

"Why?"

"If you hadn't I would have always held it against you, you know what I mean?" she said continuing to massage his shoulder.

"Uh-huh," he said. Desire caught Scar again, the intensified desire a man feels for a woman he believes he can never get. He twisted in the bed, pulling her to him.

He lay awake thinking about it for a long time. It had finally happened. Now he had the future all figured out. He would go to college and then turn pro. He knew he could make it, they said he was the greatest football player the school had ever turned out. He had the records to prove it and with Maxine believing in him — They would make a great team, he and Maxine.

Maxine had a hard time going to sleep. She knew she could really go for Scar. Too bad he wouldn't fit into her plans though. Too bad, she was waiting for the next guy to come along and offer her that break. Scar would never understand that, so it was a dead end with them. She was sorry about that, but it couldn't be helped. She was going all the

way, to the top, any way she could get there. Like Spider said, that was what she wanted. She looked over at Scar. She wasn't in any particular hurry for him to go.

33

JAKE PACED back and forth in the small cell. He wished he could get out, but he knew he couldn't. He would be caged like an animal for seven years, seven! Nobody can stand being cooped up that long. There wasn't that much time left in the world. Seven years he would be an old man. He wasn't going to stay nowhere for seven years, not even if they sealed him in a steel tank and submerged it under water. But Jenkins said he would get him paroled in three. He wondered if Jenkins could do it. But three years, Jim that was a long time! Jenkins said it wouldn't be too hard getting him paroled because he was a minor and everything. It sure sounded funny that talk about him being a minor; he sure didn't feel like a kid. Well, he could take it. He could take anything they dished out. He still didn't know what to think about Monk, wanting him to put that junk off on Georgia like that and quitting the city. Jenkins said Monk liked the way he didn't open his mouth about nothing. Monk knew he didn't have to worry about that. Jenkins said that there would be a job waiting for him when he got out, but Jake didn't know if he wanted to work for Monk. He didn't feel the same way about Monk as he used to. Man, he used to worship Monk, but now, well now he just didn't know. He knew one thing though, he didn't intend to land back in this place. But, if he didn't go back on the corners

what would he do when he got out? After all, he had never figured on getting busted in the first place. Where else was he going to make the kind of bread he had been making? Man, suppose Monk had gotten busted? He hadn't, but he must have been scared to cut out from the city like that. Maybe someday Monk would get busted too. He never thought that could happen before but now he wasn't so sure Monk was as invincible as he acted like he was. Well, so what, you had to take a chance in this world, didn't you? Something had happened on the corners lately, there were still plenty of studs out there, but there were a lot of new faces in the crowd. A lot of the ole crowd had disappeared — Red, Spider, Scar — He wondered what Scar was doing these days. He sure looked skinny. He bet Scar had gone to take the cure, damn right, otherwise? He felt good about Scar. Scar had said he would kick the monkey. Scar was ambitious deep down inside, he might do something one of these days, yeh, and Maxine on her way — But Maxine and Scar had talent, they had a chance to make big money off the corners. He didn't have no particular talent for nothing. If he got off the corners he would have to yoke somewhere, even if he went to college it would be the same thing. They didn't pay the kind of money he wanted to a stud yoking except on some of those big executive jobs which he didn't have one chance in a million of landing. Naw, the only jobs open to him was the kind where you could save your money for a thousand years and still wind up with nothing. The hell with it, when he got out he was going to have some coins in his pockets. Once, when he was seven, his father asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. "Rich," he had answered. He hadn't changed so much that he wasn't still looking for the same thing now as he was then. He wanted plenty of bread in his pockets, lots of clothes, cars. Nothing was

going to change him from wanting those things and he was going to get them one way or the other. So how did a guy like him get what he wanted in the world? The faces of his father, Pop and Mrs. Garveli floated up to haunt him. Georgia screamed as the car went over the embankment. Evelyn's accusing eyes asked him if he knew why Red died? Lamplights splattering the city, rivaling the glowing neon signs of crowded corner taverns, fear and laughter, the intoxicated pace of the flexing city, horns wailing in the distance, clicking dice and peddlers on the go, the soft intimate voice of people on the make in the afterhour cubbyhole, the soft solid feel of women in tight-fitting dresses as you crushed out daylight together on the dance floor. The answer to both questions carrouseled before his eyes and hid the course he had charted for Scar and Maxine from him forever, lost them from him forever. Armenta's face faded like any casual memory, her voice became a conscience to be ignored as he longed for the cold, intimate shores of big city nightlife, and even the threat of three years in prison and other such obstacles failed to shift him from the course that would lead him back to the harbor from which he had been exiled.

